

# Unearthing a Voice: Arendt on Action, Public Space, and Identity, a Feminist Analysis

by

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## Abstract

Hannah Arendt is a German-Jewish thinker, Holocaust survivor and one of the most influential female political theorists of the twentieth century, yet she does not write explicitly on the topic of gender. While many of her critics are quick to say that Arendt is anti-feminist and that her text *The Human Condition* is a masculinist and phallogocentric work, I argue that Arendt theorizes the emancipatory concept of action which can be put in service of the feminist movement. By exploring the three elements of *vita activa* and how they apply to men and women, Arendt's portrayal of the public and private realms and the issue of the social, and her anticipation of identity politics, particularly through her rumination on Jewish identity and womanhood, I reveal a type of feminist politics located in Arendt's *The Human Condition*. Arendt provides a vehicle for women's liberation through action, and to provide this liberation is a feminist act.

## **Dedication**

I wish to dedicate this work to my loving and supportive family, Kate Rogers, Mike Wolfe, and Iris Wolfe.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Abbreviations.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Arendt and the Theory of Action.....	11
Chapter Two: The Public and Private Realms and the Issue of the Social.....	49
Chapter Three: Identity Politics in Arendt: the Intersection of Jewish Identity and Womanhood.....	85
Conclusion.....	123
Bibliography.....	129
Curriculum Vitae	

## List of Abbreviations

The following is a list of abbreviations that will be used in this thesis:

*CR: Crises of the Republic*

*LSA: Love and Saint Augustine*

*OEW: On the Emancipation of Women*

*RV: Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*

*HC: The Human Condition*

*JP: The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition*

*O: Origins of Totalitarianism*

*WR: “What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günter Gaus*

The following texts will be cited:

Arendt, Hannah. *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics: Civil Disobedience: On Violence: Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

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## Introduction

Hannah Arendt is one of the most prominent political theorists of the twentieth century. Yet, she is not viewed as a feminist theorist nor remembered for her attention to women's political lives. Arendt was a German-Jewish political theorist who lived during the Nazi rise to power and was deeply focused on understanding the circumstances that led to the Holocaust. Having escaped persecution several times for being Jewish, Arendt's primary concern was the mass eradication of the Jewish people and understanding the underpinnings of totalitarianism. This fascination led her to publish several works on the political events of the twentieth century such as *The Human Condition*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to name only a few. Her contributions to contemporary political thought have shaped our modern understanding of what it means to be human and to live in a political community. Interestingly, Arendt rarely acknowledged her gender. She did not align herself with the women's movement. At times, she went out of her way to distance herself from feminism, despite being alive during the first and second waves of feminism and occupying the academic realm where much of feminist theory was emerging. However, in her influential text, *The Human Condition*, Arendt coins a concept called action, which I assert can be put in service of the feminist project.

With her philosophical preoccupation of seeking to understand how totalitarianism occurs, Arendt focuses *The Human Condition* on stripping human beings down to their most generic experiences. In this text, she questions what activities make up a human being. Many philosophers who came before her claim it is contemplative life that is most worthy of examination. In contrast, Arendt suggests it is active life or, *vita activa*, that makes up a human being. According to Arendt, *vita activa* is composed

of labor, work, and action.<sup>1</sup> All these activities, she argues, are fundamental to the human condition, meaning that one needs to perform all these activities to live a full human life. When these activities are unbalanced, adversity occurs.

Because all three activities are to be performed by all people, both in private and in public, Arendt's thesis in *The Human Condition* has major implications for a gendered political world. Arendt does not gender any of these concepts, although many feminist interpreters of Arendt have assumed a traditional gender divide which would feminize labor and masculinize work. This thesis will discuss these interpretations and demonstrate, ultimately, that despite their importance they overlook the significance of action as a critical and valuable concept for feminism. While all three activities are necessary to understand, action is the central concept that I take up in this thesis. I will show that action is an emancipatory and egalitarian concept that can be used for the feminist movement. Arendt may not have explicitly declared herself a feminist, but by coining the concept of action, Arendt theorizes a concept that can assist the feminist project if understood fully.

Because Arendt rarely touched on the topic of gender, and because she distanced herself from the feminist movement, many feminist theorists have dismissed Arendt. One question I consider in this thesis is whether a theorist can be feminist without explicitly declaring their allegiance to feminism. I keep this question in mind as I explore the following three areas. First, I interrogate and deconstruct Arendt's concepts of labor, work, and action both as she defines them and from various feminist

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to the labor that is part of *vita activa*, I use the American spelling, as this is the spelling used in *The Human Condition*. When I refer to labour that is not part of *vita activa*, or when I refer to caring labour in my discussion of the caring labour performed disproportionately by women in the private/domestic sphere, I use the British English spelling.



perspectives. Second, I examine her framing of the public and private realms. Arendt believes that in modernity, the public and private realms have collapsed and have created a third realm, namely, the social realm. In the social realm, there is a loss of action. According to Arendt, a loss of action directly correlates with susceptibility to totalitarianism. Therefore, we can surmise that when action is stifled, political despotism prospers. In this exploration, I also reveal that gender inequality leads to political despotism. Third, I explore Arendt's relationship to identity and expose that, through action, she approaches something akin to what we now define as intersectionality, as action acknowledges equality and distinction (Allen, 107). Through honouring the varied aspects of identity, feminists come together in solidarity.

By analyzing Arendt's three elements of *vita activa*, labor, work and action, the public and private spheres, and her treatment of identity, I demonstrate that Arendt's thought can, indeed, be used as an argument for gender equality. While Arendt was not a feminist by present standards, nor did she advocate explicitly for women, my research draws on historical readings that have traditionally been overlooked by feminist theorists to prove that Arendt contributes something useful to feminist political theory. This thesis urges the reader to think beyond typical feminist works when considering the type of political thought that can be put in service of the feminist project. My goal is not to make Arendt a feminist, but to illustrate that there are aspects to her thought that are feminist in nature, and to urge a shift in thinking on the type of ideas which ought to be valued in feminist political theory. Arendt's thought is especially relevant in the present

context, as misogyny and anti-Semitism continue to loom large. Applying her theory to the present proves useful for thinking through the inclusion of women in public life.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter One of this thesis serves as a foundation for my exploration. I begin with a brief biographical sketch of Arendt and her life. I focus on her upbringing, her university years, her influences, and the circumstances of her life. I touch briefly on her relationship with Martin Heidegger, noting that while this relationship is often given far too much attention, it bears mentioning in a feminist analysis. I examine the type of philosophy that Arendt conducted, and how it transformed over time due to the events of her life. This contextualization is necessary before embarking on analyzing one of her most famous texts.

The following purpose of this chapter is to define the three elements of *vita activa*, according to Arendt. I provide in-depth definitions of labor, work and action, narrowing in, particularly on action. After stating clearly how Arendt conceives of these concepts, I utilize feminist interpretations of labor and work to help situate my position. Many feminist interpreters of Arendt choose to analyze the way in which the concepts of labor and work are gendered, but I argue that while it can be helpful to know the gynocentric and phallogocentric approaches to Arendt, it is not productive to read her concepts as either feminine or masculine. Instead, in the reading I am offering, I suggest there is a way to understand Arendt's concept of action as gender-inclusive and as an essential element to women's freedom. I assert that it is most important to focus on the gender-neutral concept of action, as this is the most useful concept for the feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the term public life, rather than civic or political life, to indicate that, according to Arendt's concept of action, acting and disclosing oneself to others in the public sphere has a liberating quality. I posit that this liberating dimension of action is emancipatory for women. Even though, no doubt, acting in the public sphere has major political implications for women, and women have historically been denied the access to participate in the political realm, or public life of any kind, we will find that the places where women act do not always have to be the formal political arena in order for it to be considered action.

project. To support my argument, I draw on the works of Mary Dietz and Kimberly Maslin, both of whom caution against reading Arendt with a binary conception of gender in mind. Feminist interpreters of Arendt sometimes get caught up on the question of whether Arendt is a woman who thinks like a woman or a woman who thinks like a man. I am not interested in deciphering whether Arendt thinks like a woman or a man, as I believe this distinction to be reductive. Arendt does not function within this binary dichotomy and to suggest that she praises masculine or feminine traits goes against the spirit of my feminist inquiry. While some critics of Arendt suggest it is negligent to remain silent on the topic of gender, as social relations of power are very real, there are instances where Arendt speaks explicitly on the topic of gender. I detail these instances, in her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, and her essay *On the Emancipation of Women* from 1933, to reflect that Arendt had a sensitivity toward gender inequality. These examples advance my argument that Arendt can be useful for gender equality.

The last section of Chapter One provides context for the status of women in Germany in the early twentieth century, at the time in which Arendt was growing up, as these conditions would help formulate Arendt's thoughts on the plight of women. I draw on the book *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* by Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman and Marion Kaplan, to elucidate the experience of women in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. Arendt somewhat encapsulates what they call the "New Woman," who was empowered with education, was economically independent, could wear what she wanted, and had relationships, sex, and a profession (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 11). However, liberation for women is far more complex than being afforded these minor freedoms without a complete

reordering of the social relations of power and these freedoms would once again be stripped from women when the Nazis seized power.

Chapter Two analyzes the three activities of *vita activa*, the public and private realms, and what Arendt calls the rise of ‘the social.’ This is the realm that we occupy in modern society and, according to Arendt, it is the greatest threat to our freedom. In this chapter, I trace Arendt’s conjectural history of the origins of the social. She claims that the public and private realms have become blurred in modern society, and this has led to a loss of action. I then go into detail on the implications of this loss of action on society. Arendt postulates that loss of action in society leads to loneliness for all its citizens, which ultimately leads to an increased vulnerability to totalitarianism. She theorizes that lonely and atomized individuals are more likely to be controlled by a mass or a blob. But this issue is particularly complex for a feminist reading of Arendt because the social is emblematic of a society with strict gender roles and a gendered division of labour. When Arendt criticizes the social, I postulate that she is making a critique of conformism, capitalism, complacency, and conventional gender roles, as these lead to a loss of individuality, and subsequently increase the risk of totalitarianism.

The first section of this chapter defines the public and private realms in Arendt’s own words. The following section details the rise of the social. I first outline the social in Arendt’s terms, then I draw on Hanna Pitkin’s essay “Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social” to get a deeper understanding of the social and help draw out the issues that the social presents for gender. Pitkin notes that for Arendt, the social is an amorphous thing on which she blames all the evil in society. This makes this section of the thesis one of the most difficult, as the social is a tricky concept in Arendt’s thought. It is not entirely clear

that even she knew how to frame the problem of the social. Regardless, it is a revolutionary concept to describe the modern age and worthy of exploration. I also consult Seyla Benhabib who notes that the social is akin to commercial society. In a commercial society, the gendered division of labour becomes exacerbated. As such, I show that the social represents a gendered division of labour, where women labor in private, men work in public, and there is an overall loss of action, which leads to a susceptibility to totalitarianism.

Because Arendt is insistent that the social is perilous, I map the various consequences of the social. The first major consequence of living in the social realm is loneliness. In this discussion, I draw on Jennifer Gaffney's article "Another Origin of Totalitarianism: Arendt on the Loneliness of Liberal Citizens." Loneliness was another fascination of Arendt's, not only because she theorized that it leads to totalitarianism. But loneliness is a feeling felt by anyone living as a pariah in society and is sometimes emblematic of womanhood in the private sphere. Gaffney articulates that loneliness is particularly widespread in liberal societies. Action becomes lost, and we feel isolated and alienated from ourselves and from each other. In this section, I analyze world-alienation and the effect it has on political communities, I also outline the ways that this alienation can be felt more intensely by women providing caring labour in the private sphere. The solution presented in this section is that the public sphere must be upheld and protected, and all citizens must be inserted into it to perform action, not just to ensure women's equality, but for the sheer survival of the political community from totalitarianism.

Before getting to a discussion on identity in Chapter Three, I foreground the importance of public space for the exertion of one's identity. I draw on Andrea Thuma's

article “Hannah Arendt, Agency and Public Space,” to formulate criteria for agency. In her article, Thuma outlines a list of prerequisites to perform action. She states that all people must appear in public space to have their identity affirmed. All people must be empowered with the proper codes of communication so they can interact with one another, all people must be given the freedom to make something new, and all people must have a worldly attachment or a love of the world. The issue that arises, and perhaps one of the biggest issues to reconcile in this thesis, is that not all people are given the same access. In the last section of Chapter Two, I examine women’s place in the public sphere and how it needs to be presented as an attractive space for them to occupy. Ensuring that women can perform action in the public sphere requires an examination of the ways in which women are different and equal to men. Their individual identity and shared humanity must be recognized.

Chapter Three of the thesis reconciles the issue of identity politics in Arendt and provides recommendations for feminists moving forward. The solution Arendt puts forth is that we must acknowledge individual identity, but we must be careful not to mobilize around it, as this can create a mass movement, which has the possibility of creating danger for the group mobilizing around their otherness. Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen is a highly fertile ground for establishing Arendt’s relationship to identity. After completing her doctoral dissertation on Saint Augustine, Arendt shifted her focus to a more Jewish research topic in the 1930s, when anti-Semitism was on the rise in Germany. Arendt’s choice to narrow in on a prominent German-Jewish salonnière reveals that Arendt believed Varnhagen contributed something important to Berlin’s intellectual circles during the Romantic period. Arendt’s examination of Varnhagen’s life also highlights the ways in which Varnhagen was a tragic figure. Varnhagen tried all

her life to rid herself of her Jewishness, something she had to do as a woman to increase her marriageability in high society. This biography underscores the double oppression Varnhagen faced because she was female and Jewish, as was Arendt. I subsequently consult Benhabib's essay "The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen," particularly the section on the salon as female public sphere, to showcase how women used salons to carve out their own public sphere to perform action.

The next part of the chapter discusses the concept of the white-male abstract citizen. Anyone who is not this abstract citizen has a harder time being recognized as a citizen in the public sphere. I examine the case of the League of Jewish Women (JFB) and the Federation of German Women's Association (BDF), two feminist groups in Germany that were active during the beginning of the twentieth century. The two groups were unable to come together in solidarity due to the looming threat of fascism, which ultimately resulted in an inability for feminism to exist in the country, to say nothing of the mass eradication of the Jewish people. The two groups could not fully collaborate, as Jewish women had the unique experience of facing anti-Semitism and sexism, and German feminists had a difficult time accepting their Jewishness. That said, men in Jewish communities, while they too faced anti-Semitism, could not be full allies to women, as there was also sexism within Jewish communities. This section shows how oppression is experienced differently based on factors of identity and can get in the way of achieving solidarity.

Lastly, I present a concept of solidarity that can be gleaned from Arendt that focuses on the ways we are all different and equal. We all have difference in common, which makes us equal. Maria Markus suggests just because Arendt does not openly state

her interest in women's issues does not mean she is not feminist. Markus highlights that Arendt believes it is the responsibility of the privileged to uplift the oppressed. Amy Allen suggests that Arendt champions embracing different markers of identity but urges different people to act in concert together. Allen calls this the dialectic of equality and distinction (Allen, 100). Remembering Arendt's mantra of action, we are all equal and all different: "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live" (*HC*, 8). Action holds that all people have an equal capacity to act. However, this will look different in every human being, as every individual is completely unique, and this ought to be celebrated.

Although Arendt seldom addresses the condition of women specifically, she has much to offer feminist readers. Indeed, feminists and Arendt scholars have had a longstanding conversation about whether her politics reflect a gendered understanding. In this thesis, I demonstrate that Arendt's text *The Human Condition* contains feminist arguments through its emphasis on the concept of action. An examination of Arendt's concepts of labor, work, and action, her framing of the public and private spheres, and her relationship to identity politics, reveal that her arguments can be used as a guide to an equitable society wherein women are emancipated. Through action, Arendt provides a vehicle for women's liberation.



## Chapter One

### Arendt and the Theory of Action

In this chapter, I explore Arendt's concept of action and how it can be used to further gender equality. It is impossible, however, to examine action divorced from the other elements of *vita activa*, labor and work, as well as the public and private realms, the spheres in which these activities are located. Therefore, this chapter will define *vita activa*, analyze its purpose and what it is composed of, according to Arendt. For Arendt, examining the activities which make up a human life is crucial for understanding the human condition and, consequently, the path that has been, and will be, carried out by humanity.

Like many of Arendt's texts, *The Human Condition* is an exploration of how a tragedy, such as the Nazi rise to power and the Holocaust, were able to occur. Arendt is particularly concerned with how mass society operates. She is less concerned with the activities of individual actors, and more interested in finding a common ground amongst all human beings, which presents difficulty for a feminist analysis. There is a sense in which we cannot universalize all human experience, as the human experience is deeply gendered. Ignoring this fact erases the lived experiences of different groups of people, such as women. And yet, the very issue that makes a feminist analysis of Arendt's work challenging is what makes it fruitful, as a feminist critique of Arendt can simultaneously act as a feminist argument. Coining a concept that is, in theory, universally applicable suggests that all human beings have the same capacity to act and achieve. Arendt is quite insistent that they do, for their own fulfillment, and for the protection of the state from

despotism. By inserting the reality of sexism, I demonstrate that Arendt's theory of action can, indeed, be used to further gender equality and thus, be put in service of the feminist movement.

The first section of this chapter sketches the broad contours of Arendt's life, starting with her upbringing and concluding with her career in the United States. This section guides our understanding of her as a thinker and provides context for why she wrote the way she did. While one could go into much greater detail on her biography, I focus primarily on her upbringing, her time at the University of Marburg, her relationship with Martin Heidegger, her marriages, and the several occasions where she was on the run and seeking asylum in her early adult life. I touch on the complexity of her relationship with Heidegger, how it is unfair to place an overemphasis on the affair but still necessary to interrogate. I outline how her work reflects her life and vice versa. By examining her life, one comes to understand her fascination with Jewish activism, deciphering Jew as pariah, and the struggle for recentering political life and freedom.

The following section engages Arendt's key concepts of labor, work and action, considering how they are relevant to a feminist analysis of Arendt's politics. One will come to find that there is a gendered way of understanding labor and work. A feminist reader of Arendt would find it almost impossible not to view these concepts as gendered. And yet, to focus on this aspect of her thought may miss a key aspect of her work. Mary Dietz says to fixate on these concepts is a *difference feminist* reading of Arendt's work, but this is not the analysis I find to be most illuminating. If one approaches *The Human Condition* from a difference feminist perspective, they will not come away with any instructions for liberation. I delineate this when exploring Dietz's "phallogocentric" and "gynocentric" conceptions of Arendt. Dietz ultimately arrives at the conclusion that to

view Arendt as either phallogocentric or gynocentric is unfair, as Arendt's work shines most when one is examining it from a gender-neutral perspective. To suggest Arendt is praising masculine traits or feminine traits goes against the very spirit of my inquiry.

Fortunately, one only gets caught up in the mix of the phallogocentric and the gynocentric Arendt when focusing on the issues of labor and work. While Arendt insists these elements are as vital and crucial a part of human life as action is, one finds that action is the truly emancipatory aspect of her tripartite human condition. After deciphering the relevance of labor, work and action to feminism, I illuminate how the theory of action can be employed to advance gender equality. By stressing action, Arendt is propelling all people into the public sphere and advocating that everyone equally be "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words" (*HC*, 25). In Arendt's theory, no person has ability to do this above or over another. In reality, there are certain barriers that may prevent all members of society from equally accessing action, and I explore the complexity of this issue.

In exploring the highlights and challenges of action it becomes evident that Arendt saw herself as somewhat exempt from gender discrimination or, perhaps, thought it did not even exist. To understand why Arendt avoids the topic of gender in her work, it is necessary to examine the historical context of Germany at the time in which she emerged. I briefly examine the status of women in Germany in the early twentieth century to determine why Arendt seemed to see herself as somewhat exempt from gender discrimination. Most of the time, it seems as though Arendt did not think of herself as limited by her gender, or by the fact that she was a Jewish woman. Arendt was taught in the tradition of male-stream thought and was immersed in the Western tradition

of patriarchy. However, I reveal that at times, Arendt hinted at a gendered understanding, such as in her 1933 essay *On the Emancipation of Women* and her interview with Günter Gaus in 1964. In addition to this gender analysis, she put forth a concept which transcends gender, namely action. Arendt was of the belief that all humans have the capacity to act intellectually, artistically, politically, etc. By inserting this at the heart of her argument, Arendt portrays an equitable world where all contributions are weighted equally, regardless of gender.

### **Understanding Arendt**

Hannah Arendt was born October 14, 1906, in Linden, Hanover. The families of both Arendt's father and mother hailed from Königsburg, then the capital of East Prussia. Paul Arendt and Martha Cohn, Arendt's parents, were well-educated, well-travelled, and leftist. Both became socialists in their teens, while the Socialist party was still illegal. At this time, favour lied with the German Democratic Party (Young-Bruehl, 9). While they were both ethnically Jewish, neither of Arendt's parents were religious. The only exposure Arendt had to Judaism in the religious sense was when she attended synagogue with her grandparents when she was a child, where she once proclaimed to the rabbi that she did not believe in God. The rabbi responded with "And who asked you?" (Young-Bruehl, 10). This rabbi appreciated that "personal religious doubts and struggles were not at the center of Jewish identity" (Young-Bruehl, 10). This opinion represented a general shift in German Jewish consciousness that was transpiring in the early twentieth century, whereby "Regardless of what you believe or do not believe, you were born a Jew" (Young-Bruehl, 10).

Arendt first experienced anti-Semitism in the form of bullying from other children at school. She once came home to her mother asking if what one of her classmates had said – that her grandfather had murdered the Lord Jesus - was true (Young-Bruehl, 11). Martha Arendt told Hannah to never accept this type of treatment. She was adamant that when peers spoke to Hannah in this way, she had to defend herself. Alternatively, if teachers made anti-Semitic remarks to other children in the class, Hannah was to stand up and abruptly leave school for the day. Her mother would then write letters to the school protesting the behaviour of the teachers. Needless to say, Hannah was raised by a strong woman, whose mantra was that “One must defend oneself!” (Young-Bruehl, 11).

Paul Arendt died in 1913 of complications from syphilis when Arendt was only seven years old. To console her mother, young Hannah would tell her “Remember, Mama, that it happens to a lot of women” (Young-Bruehl, 20), referring to the fact she was widowed. To supplement income after Paul’s death, Martha rented out rooms in the Arendt home, and their house became a meeting place for social democrats during the final years of the first world war (Young-Bruehl, 27). Arendt was therefore exposed to political discussions at a time of immense political strife in Germany, and she would continue to be engaged in these discussions for the rest of her life.

Arendt attended the University of Marburg between the years of 1924-1926. In the fall of her first year, she met Martin Heidegger, who was thirty-five years old and married with children. He was her professor, she his eighteen-year-old student. Arendt said of Heidegger that he was “the hidden king who reigned in the realm of thinking,” which is a concerning remark when uttered by a young female student who would be taken advantage of by this “king of thinking” (Young-Bruehl, 44). The affair was not

public knowledge until the publication of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography of Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: Love of the World*, which was published in 1982. The discovery of the affair raised many issues for scholars of both thinkers. While it is not fair to examine Arendt's romantic affairs, it might be necessary only because she and Heidegger maintained a decades-long relationship through letters. They were of great academic influence on one another, including her on him. Heidegger referred to the years 1923-1928, when he was preparing *Being and Time* and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, as his most stimulating period. He would later tell Arendt that "she had been the inspiration for his work in those years, the impetus to his passionate thinking" (Young-Bruehl, 50).

Interrogating Arendt's personal life is controversial and potentially limiting to our appreciation of her political thought. Male thinkers' private lives are not the subject of interrogation in the same way. Sex and love are perhaps the two most natural states for a human being, to the point they are almost irrelevant. However, they cannot be irrelevant because they are inherently political. In this case, they are highly political. One cannot say that Arendt was influenced by Heidegger merely because she had an intimate relationship with him, but, rather, her endorsement of him indicates that she was very fond of his thought. Also, he was her teacher and, as such, imparted influence. I position myself against Arendt scholars who have placed an overemphasis on this relationship. There is a misogynistic tendency of attributing female genius to the influence of male teaching. I critique the emphasis that certain theorists place on the Arendt/Heidegger relationship. I wish only to acknowledge that these thinkers imparted influence on one another and that their relationship, like any, was fraught with social dynamics of power.

There is another element which complicates the affair even further. Heidegger supported the Nazi Party when he became rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933. While some question the authenticity of Heidegger's Nazism, as it is true that he would have had to feign Nazism to obtain such a position, or frankly, to avoid incarceration, the publication of the *Black Notebooks* in 2014 confirmed that anti-Semitism was a core aspect of his thought in later years. This complicates the fact that he had a relationship with a Jewish woman, and complicates the fact that Heidegger influenced Arendt's thought. Indeed, it can be said that Heidegger influenced Arendt's thinking, but not indefinitely and not to the point that he should be credited for her work. The integrity of her work should not be questioned. Arendt was deeply troubled when she found out that Heidegger was speaking at National Socialist meetings. She wrote to him in 1932, asking him to deny that he was drawn to National Socialism. Heidegger did not deny his sympathy to the Nazi Party, yet he reassured her that his feelings for her had not changed. This further complicates the affair. While the affair is a point of fascination, it is only fair to examine it if we examine the sex lives of all political theorists, male and female, and this would be a mostly futile endeavour.

In 1929, Arendt met Günther Stern. Stern had also been one of Heidegger's students, and Arendt had known him at Marburg when he was as a postdoctoral student but had taken little notice of him at that time. When she made Stern's acquaintance four years later, the two quickly developed a mutual fondness, and began living together after one month of dating (Young-Bruehl, 77). They married in September 1929. "The mores of Berlin intellectuals were not – to the outrage of many who viewed the capital city as the seat of sinfulness – focused around the institution of marriage; Hannah Arendt's series of love affairs and her nine months of living with Stern out of wedlock were not at

all untypical” (Young-Bruehl, 78). However, the political situation in Germany was growing increasingly dire. “The Stern’s decision to marry had this conventional dimension, but there was much else that bound them: they were both Jews of the middle-class, assimilated families; they had had similar philosophical training and shared an intellectual stance, a dedication to the revolution in philosophy Heidegger and Jaspers promoted; both were seen as astounding students with brilliant prospects” (Young-Bruehl, 79). The two would go on to collaborate intellectually.

This was also the time that Arendt abandoned her work in classical philosophy and switched focus to Rahel Varnhagen. Arendt’s studies up until this point had focused on love in the thought of Saint Augustine, so her background was more in Christian theology than anything else. The rest of her career would be devoted to ideas of Jewishness, assimilation, the concept of Jew as pariah, and Jewish activism. In 1933, the stripping of the civil liberties of Jewish people in Germany was increasing and Stern, having communist ties, fled to Paris. Arendt stayed home to be an activist and positioned herself publicly as a critic of the Nazi party. She began researching anti-Semitism at the Prussian State library but was caught by a librarian and arrested by the *Gestapo*. She was jailed and released after eight days. After the arrest, Arendt knew she had to leave Germany, so she fled to France and met up with Stern. Their relationship for all intents and purposes had ended in Berlin when Stern had left.

In 1936, Arendt met Heinrich Blücher, a Marxist philosopher (Young-Bruehl, 122). Stern fled to America with his parents that same year. Arendt divorced Stern, and married Blücher (Young-Bruehl, 133). In May of 1940, as France was about to be invaded by Germany, all men between the ages of 17 and 55 and unmarried or childless married women who had come from Germany, mainly Jews, were ordered to report for



internment (Young-Bruehl, 152). Men and women were divided, so Arendt and Blücher were separated. Arendt was interned in Camp Gurs, an internment camp in the southwest of France. Arendt was able to secure liberation papers for herself and eventually leave Gurs. Those who could not secure liberation papers were transported to extermination camps (Young-Bruehl, 155). Arendt hitchhiked to Montauban and was reunited with Blücher, whose camp had been evacuated. Arendt and Blücher immediately began the process of applying for American visas. They were granted emergency visas, thanks to the help of Günther Stern. They biked to Marseille to illegally pick-up their documents, took a train to Lisbon, Portugal, waited three months, then sailed to New York (Young-Bruehl, 159).

Arendt and Blücher arrived in New York City in May of 1941. Once in New York, they had to quickly learn English (Young-Bruehl, 165). Arendt was also anxious to return to writing and was able to do so through the German-Jewish community in New York (Young-Bruehl, 168). She wrote for a German-language Jewish newspaper and then became director of research and executive director of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in 1944 (Young-Bruehl, 188). Meanwhile, Blücher taught at Bard College. Arendt wrote and published most of her great works in America including *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. Arendt taught at many universities but, wishing to preserve her independence, always refused tenure positions. She refused the offer of a tenure track position from Princeton University because they presented her as a case of “exceptional woman” (Markus, 79). She would not have wanted to be treated any differently or as any more of an exception than her male counterparts and thought this to be insulting. Arendt was a smoker all her life and sustained a heart attack while lecturing in 1974. She

maintained poor health after this and continued to smoke. Arendt died December 4, 1975, from another heart attack when she was 69 years old.

It is helpful to know the influences on which Arendt was drawing and the thinkers who preceded her. As discussed, Heidegger was influential in Arendt's thinking. After attending the University of Marburg, Arendt left to go study at the University of Heidelberg, where she studied under Karl Jaspers, who would become another great influence and dear friend (Fry, 161). Arendt was fond of the classical tradition of civic republicanism originating in Aristotle. It is fair to say that Arendt was immersed in the Ancients, as well as Christian theology, but the branch of philosophy in which she conducted herself, if it can be given a name – which some may argue it cannot because, in a sense, her thought is a branch of its own – was phenomenology. Arendt is difficult to classify because she does not have a systematic philosophy. She is a phenomenologist in the sense that she looks for generic properties of experience, which is why she often bypasses social relations of power. But while one might notice recurring terminology when reading her various works, there is no through line in all these works. Her writings cover many topics, spanning issues or themes like totalitarianism, revolution, freedom, the history of political thought, and so on. Nor can it really be said that within one of her given texts, there is one single argument. As I will delineate, what makes Arendt unique is her action system of politics, which was a new and foreign concept in philosophy up to this point. Arendt's thought lends itself to critical theory, mass society theory, and she was contemporaries with many of the Frankfurt School theorists. But truly, Arendt's thought is in a genre of its own.

## **Labor, Work and Action**

At the outset of *The Human Condition*, what many call her most influential work, Arendt articulates what activities make up human being. As previously mentioned, Arendt was preoccupied with the existence of totalitarianism and the loss of human freedom in societies. Arendt argues that, while societies are a space where human life evolves, only in but a few societies has the social part of human nature, namely, political life, been realized as a space for individuals to achieve freedom. Safeguarding political life is the only way to maintain the sanctity of freedom in a society. But, to achieve this, one needs to identify the activities which make us human and, subsequently, determine how these activities manifest in a political community.

To elaborate, Arendt claims, “With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (*HC*, 7). *Vita activa* is the Latin term for active life, which Arendt wishes to distinguish from *vita contemplativa*, the contemplative life, beheld by the Ancients. *Vita activa* is made up of labor, work and action. Arendt defines labor as “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself” (*HC*, 7). Labor is that which aids in the preservation and reproduction of the species. Tending to one’s biological life processes essentially means to eat, sleep, exercise, drink, maintain hygiene so as not to get sick, and have sex. Any activity which helps to facilitate these tasks or assists in the maintenance of life is considered labor. One might make the connection that most domestic work, located within the private

sphere, or the mundane, feminized, work such as housework and childrearing, would be considered labor. The preservation and promotion of life ought not be downplayed, because without it, humanity could not exist. Therefore, labor is every bit as important as work and action but, perhaps, not as exciting and worldly.

The next element of *viva activa* is work, which she defines as:

...the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness" (*HC*, 7)

In this definition, Arendt is speaking of the artificial world as constructed by men.<sup>3</sup> Even if she were not using phallogocentric terminology, it is accurate to say that the artificial world is constructed by men. Historically, Western societies have been built by men. The schematics of political life and political regimes have been developed by men. Property rights are the realization of male vision. Consequently, worldly life is the realization of male vision. Work is not inherently problematic. Without it, there would be no structures to house labor or action. There would be no legislative buildings, galleries, museums, theatres, universities, and infrastructure to facilitate movement. All these institutions are inherent to human life in modern society and, therefore, must be built. Arendt is not refuting this but understands that an overemphasis on work has proven to be dangerous, just as an overemphasis on labor is dangerous.

Arendt theorizes that modern society is degraded because there has been a loss of action. Modern society is so preoccupied with labor and work that it has created a third

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<sup>3</sup> In her terminology, when Arendt says men, she is referring to mankind, or humankind. This was a conventional usage at the time. Unfortunately, when used in this context, the two terms are interchangeable. I delineate her use of the term man further in Chapter Three.

realm, in addition to that of public and private, called the social realm. This realm, which I describe in greater detail in Chapter Two, is over fixated with labor activities at the state level, meaning activities are concentrated in the wrong realms, according to Arendt, leaving the state devoid of action or freedom. While I concur with Arendt's critique of modern society, I put forth another critique of modern society, compatible with that of Arendt, which claims that an overemphasis of labor and work is degrading because, disproportionately, these are not shared activities by men and women.

There is another sense in which work is problematic when examined from a gendered lens. Work is the creation of a tool or object which will be a means to an end. "During the work process, everything is judged in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end, and for nothing else" (*HC*, 153). Work, by definition, is the process of violation or violence in which the worker interferes with nature to obtain and shape materials. For example, a tree is cut for wood, or the earth is mined for metals. Another way to think about work is the interference with nature to create property. Arendt writes:

"They [objects produced by work] are mostly, but not exclusively, objects for use and they possess the durability Locke needed for the establishment of property, the "value" Adam Smith needed for the exchange market, and they bear testimony to productivity, which Marx believed to be the test of human nature" (*HC*, 136).

Arendt believes that thinking of ourselves primarily as workers leads to a sort of reasoning in which one thinks of everything as a potential means to an end. If a prerequisite for work is a degree of violence and violation to arrive at a self-gratifying end, this poses a problem for feminist politics. While Arendt never says so explicitly, historically speaking, workers were predominantly male, and this means-end mentality

has bled into all of society. Not only is this type of thinking destructive, but it has also shaped a culture of workers with a lack of care.

The last element of *vita activa* is action. While action is wholly good, its presence and reverence in society is exceedingly rare. Arendt defines action as:

...the only activity that goes on directly between men and the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life... Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behaviour, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of action because 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, emphasis in original).

Put simply, action refers to the aspect of the human condition which makes all human beings unique. It is not fair to say that a person is defined by the ways in which they tend to their biology and keep themselves alive, nor is it fair to say they are defined by the artificial work they conduct for monetary gain and the maintenance of artificial society, even if this a large aspect of who they are. All human beings have a unique essence to share amongst the plurality.

Action is the process of humans disclosing themselves to others; it is what distinguishes them from one another. Unlike other species, there is something that makes each person individual, as much as they are the same. This process of disclosure to one another, through action and speech, is what generates human relationships. Action is twofold; it is partially about a person's unique qualities, but it only becomes action when shared with others in the public sphere. This means that action cannot occur in a

vacuum, it must occur openly. After the disclosure of one's action occurs, the response from others is every bit as important, as this, too, is action. Action relies on having a diversity of people contribute to it. This diversity amongst plurality is positive, as it allows action to be viewed from different perspectives. Action also operates on the assumption of equality between all actors. Arendt writes: "Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them" (*HC*, 175). Once again, Arendt's gendered language suggests that all 'men' be equal but, for the sake of argument, we will say that by men, she is referring to human beings. And, in fact, for the concept of action to exist, men must be expanded to include all people, because action relies on plurality, equality, and diversity (*HC*, 8). Therefore, action is inclusive, and relies on the assumption that all different types of people make up political life and participate in it.

Arendt's project in *The Human Condition* is partially about creating a blueprint for humanity, a very simple outline of what makes up a human being. However, it is also about conceiving a theory that will protect humanity from totalitarianism. It is necessary to know, at least at a glance, what Arendt means when referring to totalitarianism. In her own words: "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience" (*O*, 478). She is referring clearly to the Nazi rise to power, as well as other totalitarian regimes, such as Stalinism, but she suggests the reason these regimes had the opportunity to rise to power is due to the looming presence of loneliness in modern society. "The ideal

subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but the people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist” (O, 474). The prerequisites for totalitarian rule to which Arendt is referring are just as present today as they were in twentieth-century Europe. Arendt had a way of being terribly prophetic. Her work sometimes sounds as though, rather than being born out of the mid-twentieth century, it was born out of the twenty-first century.

A human being cannot be fulfilled or self-actualized if they do not exercise all three parts of *vita activa*: labor, work and action. Yet, by focusing only on labor and work, humans will be more vulnerable to loneliness, atomization, political apathy and, subsequently, totalitarianism. The specific action for which Arendt advocates is the creation of material which generates discourse. This reminds humans that true politics is about constantly being in dialogue about what is the best way to achieve the good life. For Arendt, it is imperative that humans share their action with others to exert their individual ideas. Arendt cautions against masses of any kind, belonging to the school of thought that, in mass society, individuals are estranged from one another and become atomized. This is the very type of phenomenon which action seeks to combat. Arendt suggests that action protects humanity from violence and danger. Action is a reminder that we are all dwellers of the earth and are all contributors to a given state. Action is the element that protects individuals against becoming massed. As such, action is a vital safeguard against totalitarianism. In the subsequent sections, I continue to explore the link between the protection against totalitarianism and protection against the tyranny of sexism.

### **Feminist Interpretations of Labor, Work and Action**



Feminists have engaged with Arendt's work for over half a century. Feminist interpretations of her work range from the position that Arendt is entirely anti-feminist, all the way to the position that her thought is critical to feminism. To embark on a feminist reading of Arendt, one must first understand her contribution to political thought as a female intellectual. In many ways, Arendt was a trailblazer for women in academia. However, she would not want to be remembered this way. While we cannot disregard the fact that she was a woman, and that the many firsts that she achieved paved the way for women who came after her, it is not fair to applaud her contributions solely based on the fact she was a woman. To do so minimizes her to the mere qualities of her identity, which she cautioned against. It is more productive, instead, to analyze her philosophy to understand what it reveals about gender and identity. Arendt espoused an idealized, non-gendered view of the world. It is not that she did not see men and women and the disparities in their privilege, but she strove for a political world in which seeing one's gender was not a primary concern.

It is unfortunate that Arendt, a twentieth-century theorist of action, participatory politics, and the public realm, did not align herself with the second-wave feminist movement occurring in North America. The women's movement was built on collective action and consciousness-raising, both of which, in theory, Arendt would commend. Yet, Arendt's activism was centered on theorizing rather than marching in the streets. While second-wave radical feminism has a strong theoretical basis, it relies on the notion that "the personal is political" (Hanisch in Crow, 113). This view is in almost direct opposition to Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition*, which claims that matters of the state in modern society focus too much on private affairs. I will unravel that what is meant by public and private by Arendt and by feminists, respectively, are

entirely distinct. Arendt did not believe that women's issues should be divorced from other emancipatory concerns (Dietz in Honig, 19). Radical feminists argued that various forms of power dynamics, such as race and class, help to reinforce sexism (Crenshaw). This interconnection of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, is known as intersectionality (Crenshaw). Radical feminists, however, insist that patriarchy is the underpinning of all oppression. Arendt simply did not align herself with this idea or, at the very least, never spoke of it, leaving us to surmise it is highly unlikely that she thought patriarchy was the origin of all oppression. Nevertheless, if her theory of action can be used as a safeguard against other forms of oppression, it is possible that it could also be used to combat patriarchy.

By the time feminists were beginning to dissect *The Human Condition*, the feminist landscape seemed to clash directly with many of Arendt's assertions. In the United States of the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist scholarly landscape saw socialist feminist arguments against patriarchal capitalism as a dual system of oppression and radical feminist arguments that patriarchy was the driving force behind all systems of oppression. Favour for the Beauvorian assertion that childrearing and childbearing were "the heart of women's oppression" sparked the beginning of "gynocentric feminism" and "difference theory," which, as I have mentioned, is not compatible with Arendt's theory (Dietz in Honig, 22). Difference feminists celebrate female difference, whereas Arendt does not even acknowledge it.<sup>4</sup> However, difference feminism relies on the

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt is more compatible with Mary Wollstonecraft, a proto-feminist who began the equality feminist movement with her work *Vindication of the Rights of Movement*. Wollstonecraft believed the reason women were thought to be intellectually inferior to men in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe was because they were not given a formal education, like their male counterparts. As such, women's intellectual inferiority was socially constructed because their minds were not cultivated. Wollstonecraft held that men and women were naturally equal, and it was artificial factors that led to gender inequality, like the provision or lack of

assumption that the binary of gender ought to be reproduced and treated unproblematically:

... The binary carries with it a heavily weighted normative dimension that formulates the female (or “women”) positively and the male (or “men”) negatively. Thus the conditions for emancipation are constructed out of the struggle between these differently weighted gender identities, and women’s liberation is resolutely connected to the victory of the female side of the gendered opposition (Dietz in Honig, 23).

Essentially, difference feminism deems feminine qualities good, and masculine qualities bad. While the dismissal of traditionally feminine qualities and the glorification of traditionally masculine qualities may explain much of women’s oppression, it is an oversimplification to say that women naturally possess certain traits, and men naturally possess certain traits. Sex difference aside, women and men do not naturally possess gendered qualities.

Difference feminism was popularized as a reaction to liberal feminism or equality feminism. Liberal feminism emphasizes the similarities between women and men, to argue for equal treatment for women. Difference feminism, although it is still aimed at equality between men and women, emphasizes the differences between men and women and argues that sameness is not necessary for men and women to be treated equally. Where liberal feminism aims to make society and law gender-neutral, difference feminism holds that gender-neutrality harms women “whether by impelling them to imitate men, by depriving society of their distinctive contributions, or by letting them participate in society only on terms that favor men” (Grande Jensen, 3). If Arendt could be said to have fallen into any feminist camp, it would be equality feminism. Difference

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education. This is in direct opposition to difference feminism, which suggests men and women possess fundamentally different qualities and female qualities are valuable and ought to be celebrated.

feminism urges society to celebrate “feminine” traits such as empathy, nurture and care. While these traits ought to be valued and upheld by all humans in society, and enshrined as part of the human condition, I argue that these traits are socially constructed, and women exert them because it is what is expected of them in a patriarchal society. Men, too, would be capable of these traits if it was demanded of them by society. Arendt urges that all human beings be capable of these traits, which ought to be gender neutral.

Mary Dietz suggests that if one reads Arendt with binary gender (masculine vs. feminine) in mind they will come away with either a phallogocentric reading of Arendt, or a gynocentric reading of Arendt. A phallogocentric reading of Arendt will leave the reader believing that Arendt is “a woman who thinks like a man” (Dietz in Honig, 23). Arendt locates action in the public sphere, which she deems the political realm. She believes this is the sphere where emancipation occurs. Many of her critics, such as Adrienne Rich and Mary O’Brien, believe feminist emancipatory politics will happen thanks to women’s work and reproductive consciousness, both of which occur in the private sphere. They charge Arendt with being immersed in male-stream thought, saying she celebrates “the common world of men” (Rich, 208). Rich writes that Arendt represents “the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies” (Rich, 212), and O’Brien refers to her as “a woman who accepts the normality and even the necessity of male supremacy” (O’Brien, 100). Arendt’s critics disagree with her on the geographical locations of where emancipation occurs. Carol Hanisch coined the term ‘the personal is political,’ meaning the social relations of the domestic sphere that occur between men and women within the household, are deeply political (Hanisch in Crow, 113). However, the only way to challenge these power relations is in the political realm. Sexual

narratives about men and women are perpetuated in the public sphere. Therefore, the responsibility lies with public actors to remedy sexism.

Rich and O'Brien reduce Arendt to the binary distinction of public and private and, in so doing, ignore Arendt's tripartite human condition of labor, work, and action. They are also projecting gender onto these activities when they are not inherently gendered. O'Brien goes as far as to say that Arendt is a female male supremacist. Because she is thinking of Arendt's activities only in terms of gender, she is missing a large piece of Arendt's vision. Rich and O'Brien are not the only feminists to do this. Wendy Brown also "imposes a binary category that erases Arendt's tripartite construction (*animal laborans:homo faber:action*) and maps a gender dichotomy with masculinist preferences upon Arendt's text" (Dietz in Honig, 26). Brown particularly condemns Arendt's celebration of the Greek polis. She stresses that "by locating freedom in the realm of politics, Arendt fulfills the phallogocentric desire for release from the realm within which "Woman" has been traditionally configured: bodily maintenance, necessity, and life" (Dietz in Honig, 26). Perhaps it is not wrong to think that freedom is achieved once women are emancipated from bodily maintenance, necessity and life but, to shift these expectations, women must enter public life.

Just as Arendt has critics, she also has her supporters. Some feminist theorists find Arendt's work to be highly fertile ground for female emancipatory politics. Dietz cites Nancy Hartsock who writes: "Arendt remains an interesting and important example whose work indicates some of the beneficial theoretical effects women's experience of both connection and individuation may have... She has, despite her adherence to the Homeric model, reinterpreted it in ways much more congruent with women's than men's experience" (Dietz in Honig, 27). Hartsock points to Arendt's concept of natality, which

is an important element of the human condition. Natality essentially refers to “bringing something new” (*HC*, 178). While the mind certainly goes to ideas of reproduction and life, perhaps even birth, natality is a crucial piece of action, which Arendt treats as genderless. “Each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can truly be said that nobody was ever before” (*HC*, 178). Natality can be said to be singularity amongst plurality, which is the very essence of action. Hartsock, along with Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Terry Winant, argue that Arendt is pro-mother, and this is what makes her work feminist. This line of thinking is reductive; just because something focuses on reproduction does not make it feminist. Glorifying women’s bodies because they are the site of life is a dangerous argument, and certainly not emancipatory. Nevertheless, this reading of Arendt is gynocentric, portraying her as “provid[ing] a maternal history of human flesh” that celebrates “a birthgiving woman’s labor” (Dietz in Honig, 27). While it is certainly true that Arendt would recognize women’s role in bringing life into the world, she would not reduce a person to this act alone. These activities are indebted to *animal laborans*, meaning they can be attributed to the biological life processes of the female body. But, as we know, Arendt would not praise biological life processes in an isolated way. While they are important, they do not a full person make. One must not mistake labor for action.

The most productive feminist reading of Arendt is one that looks beyond the surface to find the universal and liberatory political value in action. Any feminist reader of Arendt is going to take issue with the fact that she overtly disregards women’s lived experience in her portrayal of the public and private realms. However, there are certain feminists who theorize that Arendt viewed the private realm as limiting, particularly

because it reduces women to the life process. This could be why she refuses to gender these spheres and why she urges all people to participate in the public sphere, through action. Joanne Cutting-Gray writes “as early as 1933 Arendt saw that the private sphere to which women are relegated devalues their potential because it valorizes the life process” (Dietz in Honig, 29). Non-difference or equality feminists suggest there is a gender subtext in *The Human Condition*, be it intended or unintended. They argue that Arendt thematizes gender as a definitive concept of modernity and displaces this through an action concept of politics.

In her article “The Gender-Neutral feminism of Hannah Arendt,” Kimberly Maslin suggests that feminist scholars have returned to Arendt’s work to answer the “woman question in Arendt” and the “Arendt question in feminism” (Maslin, 585). The first approach attempts to identify implicit feminist messages in her work, while the latter uses an Arendtian approach to challenge feminist perspectives and “carve out a new approach to politics, power, or women’s issues” (Maslin, 585). Maslin asserts that an Arendtian approach to feminism is worthy of serious reconsideration because Arendt refuses to divorce the political from the ontological aspects of human existence meaning that she refuses to divorce the political from lived experience. Maslin showcases that a lack of systemic analysis of gender does not indicate indifference or hostility toward gender issues. In fact, Maslin reveals two cases where Arendt’s explicit sensitivity toward gender issues was on full display. First, in a 1933 book review of Alice Rühle Gerstel’s *Contemporary Women’s Issue: A Psychological Balance Sheet*, also known as Arendt’s essay *On the Emancipation of Women*, and then in a 1964 interview with Günter Gaus titled “*What Remains? The Language Remains*”: *A Conversation with Günter Gaus*.

Although Arendt does not write extensively on the gender question, Arendt's implicit message to her feminist readers is that the "'woman problem' occurs when constant engagement in labor and lack of solitude lead to a self-denial in which loneliness becomes an ontological condition rather than an intermittent reality." (Maslin, 586). Maslin is suggesting that women's disproportionate performance of labor leads to a form of loneliness and isolation that disables women from being able to participate in action. Maslin's interpretation reveals that Arendt may have been sensitive to the fact that action is not equally accessible to all people. However, Arendt's awareness at the very same time acts as an instruction. If one wants to perform action, one cannot become overly absorbed in labor. Her argument remains consistent that over-prioritizing labor is dangerous. Although Arendt does not address women's exclusion from public life, as a phenomenologist, she chooses instead to expose the underlying phenomena of this exclusion, rather than reinforcing binary social constructs (Maslin, 587). Maslin notes that, while it is disappointing for feminists that a book entitled *The Human Condition* barely mentions women, this is not because Arendt is completely indifferent to the plight of women. Rather, women are not recognized in the text because for Arendt, the "woman question" is not an issue of gender as much as it is an issue of loneliness that stems from confinement to biologically grounded tasks, which are dehumanizing and lacking in social value (Maslin, 588).

When observing the "Arendt question in feminism," there appears to be a radically gendered subtext in *The Human Condition*. As I have mentioned above, Adrienne Rich charges Arendt for writing *The Human Condition* as a masculinist text that reinforces male ideologies. But Rich is applying the binary concept of gender to this text. In this sense, Arendt is confined to being either phallogentric – a woman who



thinks like a man – or gynocentric – a woman who thinks like a woman. To suggest women can only think like women is problematic. What does it mean to think like a woman? Perhaps this only means to be sensitive to oppression and injustice, which Arendt most certainly was, but to suggest she could only think like a man or think like a woman is insulting. Arendt does not function in this dichotomy. Maslin writes “the preferred category [for Arendt] is not the masculine work but the genderless action, which renders both labor and work inferior” (Maslin, 588). To impose binary constructs onto Arendt’s nonbinary thought is to obscure some of her most interesting and complex contributions, such as genderless action (Maslin, 589).

As Maslin rightly points out, the most overt examples of Arendt espousing feminist arguments appear not in her canonical works, but in small snippets of her actual life. Arendt speaks explicitly on the “woman problem” in *On the Emancipation of Women* where she addresses gender inequity as an issue of economic independence. She writes that although “today's women have the same rights legally as men, they are not valued equally by society... if they were to work on the same pay scale, they would—in keeping with their social value—simply lose their positions of employment...for the time being the independence of women is economic independence from men” (*OEW*, 66). While it is not true that when women become economically self-sufficient from men they automatically become equal to men, Arendt seems to recognize the liberating nature of economic independence from men, as it means that one can also be socially independent from men. With economic independence comes less need for women to marry men to secure economic stability, to be confined to the home and be forced to procreate.

The notion of women as property slowly starts to dissipate once women begin to earn wages. Of course, to earn money in the same way that men have historically is not emancipatory, as it binds women to the same chains that men are bound to under capitalism. Arendt is not advocating for women to shift their focus off labor and shift it all onto work, as this too would be harmful. However, she is suggesting that if women are equal economic actors to men, they are not trapped, and their choices become more diverse. She says of the average working woman:

Not only must she accept, despite her legal equality, less remuneration for her work, but also she must continue to do socially and biologically grounded tasks that are incompatible with her new position. In addition to her profession, she must take care of her household and raise her children. Thus, freedom to make her own living seems to imply either a kind of enslavement in her own home or the dissolution of her family (*OEW*, 67).

Not only did women at the time of this essay, and still sometimes today, receive less pay for the same position as their male counterparts, their professions are not their only responsibility. While men have traditionally taken on the role of breadwinner, working women are tasked with the roles of breadwinner, homemaker, child-bearer and child-rearer. In addition to being professionals, women are still human givers and responsible for taking care of everyone else in the home.<sup>5</sup> If they are unable to, due to the demands of their work, they offset this caring labor to another woman, such as a nanny, housekeeper, or child caregiver. Ultimately, women continue to be the only ones bound to these biologically grounded tasks.

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<sup>5</sup> In her book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne coins a terminology that perfectly describes the labor problem in Arendt, as well as the gendered loneliness that Maslin speaks to in her article. Manne suggests that in the world there are two types of people: human beings and human givers. Human beings are fully realized people and active participants in the world but are only able to be so because they rely on a human giver, almost always a woman. “Her humanity may hence be held to be owed to other human beings, and her value contingent on giving moral goods to them: life, love, pleasure, nurture, sustenance, and comfort, being some such (Manne, 22).

In a 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, the incipient feminist inclination of Arendt becomes more visible. In this interview, Arendt calls herself old-fashioned, believing that some occupations are unbecoming of women. But her reasoning for this is quite perplexing. “It just doesn’t look good when a woman gives orders. She should try not to get into such a situation if she wants to remain feminine” (*WR*, 4). Arendt is correct to say that in a patriarchal society, where women’s social value is determined by their femininity and ability to be submissive, they should try to remain feminine. While it may sound oppressive, this statement, simultaneously acts as a feminist critique. Women are pressured to remain feminine, demure and beautiful, as it may secure them better lives. The more attractive women are to men, the more economic stability they may be able to secure and, surely, the more physical validation they receive from men. Women are taught to believe that this is the most valuable form of currency available to them. Mary Wollstonecraft calls the ability to exercise this femininity *bodily wit*. In a society where women are deprived of exercising intellect or political power, the only power they are permitted to utilize is *bodily wit*.<sup>6</sup> Arendt is not saying that women should not assume authoritative roles, she is implying they should not assume authoritative roles if they wish to remain feminine, acknowledging the existence of socially constructed gender norms.

Later in the interview, Arendt hints at the fact she has been able to skirt the woman problem because she has “always done what I liked to do” (*WR*, 4). She suggests she has undertaken an academic career despite the fact she is a woman, and that this has posed no problems for her because she is unapologetic. That said, she notes that she has

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<sup>6</sup> “Besides, women from necessity, because their minds are not cultivated, have recourse very often to what I familiarly term *bodily wit*; and their intimacies are of the same kind” (*Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 7.158).

a feminine approach to scholarship, suggesting that men and women are different, and she skews more favourably towards the feminine approach. When Gaus asks her whether she wants to achieve influence with her works she replies: “that is a masculine question... [men] always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external” (*WR*, 5). She continues:

What satisfies me is the thought process itself. As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process in writing, that satisfies me also.... Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand—in the same way that I have understood—that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home (*WR*, 5).

Arendt is right to suggest that the intent of many male scholars is to assert their thinking onto others. However, she merely wishes to prompt others to think, to spark political action. To tell one’s reader exactly how to think is authoritarian and masculinist. The masculine aspiration to achieve influence relies on the external. Arendt is suggesting that for male scholars, their satisfaction relies on the positive feedback of others. Arendt says that for her, the validation is internal, she seeks only to understand.

These examples show that Arendt, at certain points in her life, indicated a keen awareness of gender issues. Yet, there is a sustained distance from gendered relations of power in her work. She may not have written about gender in her most influential works, at least not explicitly, but to suggest that this is a failure on her part is limiting. Great female scholars need not write on the topic of women for their work to be valuable. However, Arendt does address gender implicitly through her concept of action and notes also that women’s access to action may be more scarce, due to their confinement to labor activities. She offers that the beginning of emancipation from labor starts with women securing economic independence from men and states further that it is not just

economic independence that is necessary to ensure equality, but also a type of thinking is required. An approach to thinking that seeks simply to understand rather than penetrate influence. This type of thinking does not make her like a man or like a woman but prompts and inspires others to think with the same sensitivity and perceptiveness.

Amongst these feminist interpretations, I situate myself with Dietz and Maslin. I hold that, by not necessarily acknowledging gender, Arendt is universalizing her normative political framework. While this does not account for the reality of sexism in political life, she has an aspirational vision of political life that is, in fact, more progressive than present-day. Arendt posits that laborers and workers will lose connection to their humanness, because they do not practice action and do not equally perform in the public sphere, disclosing themselves to others. Because failing to do so results in loneliness which increases vulnerability to totalitarianism, the stakes are incredibly high. Thus, this is a rallying cry to all human beings, men, and women alike, to perform action and maintain the distinction of both the public and private realms, participating in both equally, regardless of gender. No, Arendt does not use gendered terms, and never addresses the woman problem head-on, but she is launching women into the public/political realm to exercise action, and this theoretically would allow for more gender equality than what has been accomplished to date. Projecting a binary lens onto Arendt is unfair because Arendt did not work in these binary distinctions. Rather, she worked in tertiary distinctions such as labor, work and action. Arendt's feminism lies in her critique of the social realm. In modernity where the public and private have become conflated, and labor and work are performed disproportionately by men and women, there is no space for action, leading us to be more susceptible to loneliness,

apathy, totalitarianism, and increasing sexism. Arendt acknowledges a gendered division of labour and wishes for a completely egalitarian society.

### **Arendt vs. Woolf**

Virginia Woolf is a feminist writer whose ideas provide a provocative counterbalance to Arendt. Woolf was born in 1882 and died in 1949, whereas Arendt was born in 1906 and died in 1975. The peak of Arendt's career was around the time of Woolf's death, however, there is an overlap in the time of their writing, namely, around the period of World War II. Woolf is particularly relevant to our conversation as she was a committed pacifist, deeply critical of fascism and war. While Arendt's work does not focus on the prevention of war, it certainly focuses on the repercussions and atrocities of war. The two thinkers, however, have different perspectives on the cause of war. Woolf postulates that war can be explained purely by patriarchy. She describes that violence is a male tendency, and to prevent war, one must elevate the status of women in society.

In her text *Three Guineas*, Woolf is writing a letter in response to an unnamed correspondent who has asked her how to prevent war (Woolf in Smith, 332). She states that her thinking on the matter may be foreign to him, as he is a man. She explains that daughters of educated men are impoverished, even if they come from well-to-do families. Sons of educated men are educated and enriched. Their families spend a great deal of money and energy on their education, their travel, and their self-actualization. These families do not invest in their daughters' educations, simply because education was not seen as a necessary or acceptable pursuit for women at the time. Woolf suggests that daughters of educated fathers make up a class of their own. They cannot be called bourgeois, as their lives have not been filled with the same luxuries as their brothers, and

they are perhaps even more powerless than working class women. If working class women cease to work, there could be no war effort, as the nation is dependent on the goods that these women make; this is unlike daughters of educated men who possess no tools. Woolf recognizes that this powerlessness is completely constructed, through the lack of education that women receive and, also, the class system, and she suggests that this imbalance must be rectified for the prevention of war. Woolf explains: “For though many instincts are held more or less in common by both sexes, to fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s. Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us; it is difficult to judge what we do not share” (Woolf in Smith, 333). It is certainly true that over the course of human history, violence has been enacted by men. Some men have gone as far as saying that this violence is human nature, but they are mistaken. Violence is man’s socialized nature which the rest of society has fallen suit to believe is natural and condonable. I will go as far as to say what no one enjoys saying or hearing, that war is a male construct. War would not exist if it were not for male entitlement and the male desire to play God.

Let us not also forget that women are targets of war. The term ‘civilian’ accounts for women but helps us to forget, conveniently, that civilians are women. Male soldiers get hurt and die, which is not to be taken lightly, but women are the victims of war, and men are the perpetrators of war. It is important when we think of victims of war, not just to include male soldiers, but women and children, as well as the women who men rape as part of the conquering of land, or the wives of soldiers who become victims of domestic violence when men return home after having been traumatized by war (Enloe,

15).<sup>7</sup> Women are victims of war and war would not exist if it were not for men. Woolf writes: “However many dissentients there are, the great majority of your sex are today in favour of war” (Woolf in Smith, 333). Men tend to view war and militarism as displays of patriotism, national pride, courage, and honour. But women have no such reason to feel this way. “But the educated man’s sister – what does ‘patriotism’ mean to her? Has she the same reasons for being proud of England, for loving England, for defending England? Has she been ‘greatly blessed’ in England? (Woolf in Smith, 333). The answer, quite simply, is no.

Women in England at this time were second-class citizens. On what grounds would women feel the same degree of national pride, in a nation where they are not afforded the same privileges as men? Perhaps men feel the need to protect their freedom, but what freedom do women have to protect? Woolf continues “There has been no perceptible women’s movement to resist the practical obliteration of their freedom by Fascists and Nazis” (Woolf in Smith, 339). A defining aspect of a fascistic government is the stripping of women’s rights. Although Arendt does not write on this issue specifically, she is fully aware of the ramifications of fascism. When one examines *Three Guineas*, one finds that war, colonialism, imperialism, totalitarianism, conquering, and killing, are all products of patriarchy. This stems from the notion that men are aggressive, dominant, active and, whereas women are subordinate, submissive, passive, and receptive. Woolf offers that the only way to prevent war is to enact real social change for women. She pledges three guineas: one to build a women's college to educate

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Enloe’s *Seriously! : Investigating Crashes and Crises As If Women Mattered* is a must-read text for understanding how women are so often left out of conversations regarding militarism, economic crashes, and matters of international relations. Enloe believes that taking women seriously and recognizing their roles in, as well as how they are impacted by, these matters, is crucial for not only our understanding of these events, but perhaps also in determining how they can be prevented.



women; one to include women in professional work; and one to include women in the public sphere. Woolf is worth mentioning not only because she was revolutionary in her writings about these concepts, but because she wrote at a similar time as Arendt, in the same broad context, in fact a little bit before Arendt. Woolf captures the consequences of patriarchy and the perils of war, and the link between these two, in a far more overt way than Arendt ever did. It is helpful to compare the two thinkers, as Woolf is beheld by many feminists for her courage and brilliance, whereas feminists have a more difficult relationship with Arendt. Nevertheless, examining Woolf helps to draw out the fact that Arendt wove similar themes into her philosophy. For Arendt, women's freedom would lie in their ability to assert individuality and prove their capacity for action. This is not so dissimilar from Woolf; it is simply crafted differently. While Arendt may wish to use action to combat totalitarianism and Woolf may wish to abolish patriarchy, it may be the case that these two solutions are one in the same.

### **The Status of Women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany**

To better understand Arendt's thinking on gender, one must examine the cultural landscape of Germany at the time in which she was writing, particularly as it pertains to women and gender. German women acquired suffrage in 1919, which granted them the right to vote as well as equal rights and responsibilities as men (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 5). Initially, women made remarkable political gains. They voted in great numbers in the first National Assembly elections and almost 10 per cent of the delegates were women (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 7). During the first world war, the position of women in the workforce began to shift, with women holding positions that had been previously held only by men. These tended to be positions that made women more

public-facing, transforming women into visible actors in society. However, upon men's return from the first world war, animosity between the sexes increased. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman and Marion Kaplan write in their book, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*: "Demobilization removed thousands of women from their wartime jobs and retracked others into lower paying "female" areas. By creating unemployment and job competition, demobilization intensified antagonism between the sexes (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 7). Additionally, women, like Jews, were blamed for losing the war. Their recent entry into political and cultural life made such scapegoating easier (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 8).

The 1920s saw the emergence of the 'New Woman' in Germany:

Indeed, Weimar culture did produce a certain heady and intoxicating sense of freedom in the big cities, especially for some intellectual and professional women. But the development of the 'new woman' represented a phenomenon both broader and more complex than the images of the flapper or the sexy saleslady convey. The new woman – who voted, used contraception, obtained illegal abortions, and earned wages – were more than a bohemian minority or artistic convention" (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 11).

The New Woman represented a new economic figure, an independent worker and wage-earner who could participate in the market that had previously only been reserved for men, a new political figure who appeared at parties and in parliament, a new physical figure with short hair and short skirts, no longer bound to the traditional physical constraints of being female, and a new intellectual-psychological figure who strove toward an objective knowledge of the world and the self (Rühle-Gerstel, 218). One might say that Arendt fit the description of the New Woman. She certainly represented the economic, political, physical, and intellectual figure of the New Woman in Germany.

The New Woman also became a symbol of degeneracy in Nazi propaganda, as she threatened the order and stability of Germany. The New Woman would never really gain much traction. As Rühle-Gerstel writes: “Before [the new woman] could evolve into a type and expand into an average, she once again ran up against barriers.” When war veterans returned home, they re-entered the workforce and re-assumed their role of household breadwinner. Politicians began to advocate that women return to the traditional roles of wife and mother. It became less and less possible for a married woman to work as she was called a “double earner” (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 10). Rather than guarantee equality to women, the state instead tried to make motherhood appear attractive. Mother’s Day in Germany was promoted as a National Day of Celebration for the moral majority. The slogan “*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*” which translates to children, kitchen and church, was popularized to direct women to their ‘rightful place.’ *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* was an integral part of the Nazis’ program. As Germany was falling back into economic uncertainty at the end of the 1920s, it was thought that forcing women into these submissive roles “would provide stability in a social world that seemed to be rapidly slipping from their control” (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 43). The Nazis, like most far-right and fascist groups, viewed women’s autonomy as a dangerous and corruptive force that would disrupt their plan for total tyranny over the state. Any feminism or female autonomy that had existed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany was repressed once the Nazis began to rise to power. I further explore the status of women in Germany and the intersecting identities of Jew and woman in Chapter Three.

## Conclusion

An inquiry into Arendt's work must begin with the three elements of *vita activa*, labor and work, and action, and an understanding of their meaning and purpose. Various feminist interpreters of Arendt's work rightly show how these terms are gendered. However, to gender labor and work is not necessarily productive. While it may be tempting to attach private/domestic labour to the term labor, and worldly/masculine efforts to the term work, Arendt's conceptualizations of labor and work do not represent two different groups of people but, rather, two different aspects of humans that ought to be embodied by all people. When one is over-exercising labor or over-exercising work, in the absence of action, their life will be deficient. On a broader scale, if a society over-prioritizes labor or work, this society will become more susceptible to loneliness, atomization, and totalitarianism. While Arendt never openly criticizes activities carried out by men or women, to say that modern society is degraded because these elements are improperly balanced simultaneously makes a critique of a gendered division of labour. Put simply, labor and work, while both necessary and important for the continuation of life and society, are damaging when divorced from action. And action cannot be gendered in any way.

As Dietz elucidates, critics and supporters of Arendt have misinterpreted her work when approaching it from a phallogentric or gynocentric lens. Many feminist interpreters of Arendt have made the mistake of viewing Arendt's distinctions as a sort of hierarchy that places work above labor, public above private, or *homo faber* above *animal laborans*. Arendt is ardent in the fact that all distinctions are neutral, much to the disappointment of difference feminists. Feminist critics of Arendt condemn her use of phallogentric language and immersion in male-stream thought but choose to ignore the

gender neutrality of the tripartite human condition. Conversely, feminist supporters of Arendt who commend her for her focus on natality and associate her with reproduction and being pro-mother, are searching for an Arendt that applauds female difference.

While it may be possible to interpret Arendt in this way, it is not an accurate or authentic interpretation of her thought and does not lead to the emancipatory politics she espouses.

Rather, it is more productive to read Arendt as someone who champions ungendered activity. Through action, Arendt is imagining a political stage where there can be freedom and equality. For action to be exercised, the public sphere must be expanded to include all people, because action relies on plurality, equality, and diversity. Action is inclusive and relies on the assumption that different types of people make up a political community and participate in it.

By examining the historical context in which Arendt was writing, one can understand why feminism was not her primary cause. Due to the set of circumstances in early twentieth century Germany, her solidarity fell more with her Jewishness than it did with her gender. Arendt faced anti-Semitism all her life but prior, to World War II, conditions were improving for some women. Arendt embodied many qualities of the New Woman, so she perhaps saw herself as being essentially equal to men. With the Nazi's rise to power came an erosion of the rights afforded to women in Germany, but by that time her lot was determined by her ethnicity/religion. This is not to say gender does not also intersect with these categories, it most certainly does. But pitting Jewish women against non-Jewish women made it so that solidarity could not be achieved, and they could not share their experience of oppression across the line of gender.

Arendt's theory of action is potentially emancipatory when it takes into consideration the realities of sexism and other forms of pre-existing oppression. While

Arendt rarely spoke explicitly about oppression on the basis of gender, an examination of her life reveals that she was most certainly affected by the fact she was a woman. However, Arendt did not see this as a limitation, nor did she view being Jewish a limitation. She chooses to locate freedom in the universal concept of action, which theoretically negates categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, or religion. Yet, while action is not gendered, access to action can be determined by gender. Because action is located within the public sphere, and women have traditionally been confined to the private sphere, women's access to action has been historically limited. I explore the difficulty of accessing action in a sexist reality in the following chapter.

## Chapter Two

### The Public and Private Realms and The Issue of the Social

This chapter explores the public and private realms, as outlined by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Subsequently, it reveals the social realm, which, according to Arendt, we all occupy in modern society. Arendt theorizes that in modern society the public and private realms have become blurred, which is not good, as it leads to a loss of action. It is natural when undergoing a feminist analysis of *The Human Condition* to be tempted to examine the public and private realms and hope this examination will reveal something about private relations being political. But this is not the case for Arendt, at least not upon first glance. Rather, Arendt claims that private occupations should not be political as this is the societal ill with which she diagnoses modern society. Perhaps her thought here is aspirational as her wish is for the social relations of power to not be exercised at home and that the sanctity, beauty, and comfort of the private/household sphere be preserved. It is a place for love, rather than a place that is inherently political. Her critique is that we are too steeped in private matters at the political level. As a feminist considering the political arena of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to agree with Arendt. However, when Arendt is criticizing the social, she is criticizing capitalism, a gendered division of labour, loneliness, conformism, complacency, and a loss of individuality. In this chapter, I closely dissect Arendt's public, private and social realms, and in this reading, I offer that Arendt's critique of the social realm mirrors a critique of a gendered division of labour. One finds that both her vision of the social and the reality of sexism, namely, the disproportionate division of labor and work, lead to a degraded society.

## The Public and the Private Realm

Arendt begins Chapter 2 of *The Human Condition* by explaining the significance of the public and private realms:

The *vita activa*, human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something, is always rooted in a world of men and of man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends. Things and men form the environment for each of man's activities, which would be pointless without such location; yet this environment, the world into which we are born, would not exist without the human activity which produced it, as in the case of fabricated things; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which established it through organization, as in the case of the body politic. No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings (*HC*, 22).

She then locates action's presence in the public realm, and explains why it is necessary to be located there, thus necessitating the preservation and sanctity of the public realm:

All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men. The activity of labor does not need the presence of others, though a being laboring in complete solitude would not be a human but an *animal laborans* in the word's most literal significance. Man working and fabricating and building a world inhabited only by himself would still be a fabricator, though not *homo faber*: he would have lost his specifically human quality and, rather, be a god – not, to be sure, the Creator, but a divine demiurge as Plato described him in one of his myths. Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others (*HC*, 23).

Arendt once again calls a being who performs labor in solitude something less than human and refers to it as *animal laborans*. This being does not have the luxury of performing action. They do not have access to it, not only because they are too busy performing labor, but because they do not have access to the space in which action takes place. Action occurs in the public realm. "It is only action that cannot even be imagined



outside the society of men” (HC, 22). Arendt also states that a man creating by himself, for himself, is a god. Man is only human if he is creating for others. There is a sense in which this speaks to man’s provisional essence, saying that he is more human if he is providing for others, denoting that a true human has a responsibility to provide care to others in some form. Yet ‘man’ is still able to enjoy public space while doing so.<sup>8</sup> As such, he also enjoys public recognition for his words and deeds. Labor receives no such recognition.

Arendt speaks to the distinction of the public and private realms according to her conjectural history. She defines the term ‘society’ using the Ancient Greek meaning. “Yet the Latin usage of the word *societas* also originally had a clear, limited, political meaning; it indicated an alliance between people for a specific purpose” (HC, 23). Herein, she acknowledges that a true political realm has people working together towards a common goal, this common goal being the welfare of the state. With the rise of the city-state, however, man began to have two different existences – a private life and a political life:

According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family. The rise of the city-state meant that man received “besides his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*. Now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp distinction in his life between what is his own (*idiom*) and what is communal (*koinon*).” It was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the polis was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the *phratia* and the *phylē*. Of all activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called *bios politikos*, namely action

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss Arendt’s use of the term ‘man’ more in depth in Chapter Three in the section “Who is a Citizen?”

*(praxis)* and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realms of human affairs... from which merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded (*HC*, 25).

When Arendt writes that every citizen now has two orders of existence, their own life and their communal life, she is speaking about everyone. Regardless of which realm one occupies the most, every person belongs to both and takes up both at different times in their life, typically every day. All people have both personal and communal lives, some are just richer than others.

It is necessary to understand that Arendt holds the private and public realms in equal regard, stating that both are necessary. In her view, both are central to human life. Neither the acclaim of public life, nor the meeting of physical needs, will lead to a life well-lived. She would never recommend that a person spend more time in one realm over the other. Humans require other human beings, and society, for survival, recalling the phrase “not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (*HC*, 22). The problem with both labor and work is that they can both be solitary pursuits. Even if they are conducted amongst others, they do not have the element of acting together that action does. Arendt is adamant that action requires living amongst other people and establishing relationships and friendships with others. “To be political, to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (*HC*, 26). The public sphere is the place where individuals communicate as equals. It is fueled by persuasion, debate, and analysis. Put simply, the public realm is where people distinguish themselves through ideas.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Part of Arendt’s project is to revive some sort of version of the Ancient Greek *agora*, which simply translates to “a public open space used for assemblies and markets,” a place where one sees and

The private realm refers to the household. Arendt points out that, traditionally, only men occupied the public sphere. The fact that their physical needs were taken care of by others, namely women or, at one time, enslaved people, gave men the freedom to participate in the world of ideas. “The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the *polis*” (HC, 31). This is to say that there would be no freedom in politics if it were not for the functioning of the household. She notes specifically the roles of men and women in the household. “That individual maintenance should be the task of the man and species survival should be the task of the woman was obvious, and both of these natural functions, the labor of the man to provide nourishment and the labor of the woman to give birth, were subject to the same urgency of life” (HC, 30). Arendt acknowledges that as time went on, these strict roles dissipated. Remembering once again that this text is entitled *The Human Condition*, and Arendt considers all people to be human – including herself, a woman – the instructions which she espouses in this text are meant for all people. One might say that the essence which corresponds to the private realm is labor and the essence which corresponds to the public realm is work, as work is what creates the public realm. Because Arendt believes both realms to be worthy of respect, she simultaneously denotes that both the traditionally feminine work done in private, and the structural world building done in public are equally important. However, by stressing that neither one is fulfilling enough on its own, she recognizes a gendered division of labour and refuses the hierarchy that assigns the public realm a higher value.

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communicates with others, so to speak. This is a good way to think about what is meant by the public realm.

A life lived only in public is shallow, heartless, and meaningless, and a life lived only in private is animalistic, lonely, and unfulfilling. One needs action for a full human life, which must be exercised in public (*HC*, 7).

Action, while it must be exercised in public, is lost with the rise of the social realm in the modern age. Social and political realities shape people's lives, and their freedom is lost as a result:

The distinction between a private and public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state (*HC*, 28).

According to Arendt's philosophical anthropology it is not so much that humanity lost the ability to perform action or lost the capacity to act. It is more so that action was replaced by something else. Arendt speaks of the industrial revolution as an instigator of the social, and typically speaks of technology in a skeptical and wary way.<sup>10</sup> "The

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<sup>10</sup> The prologue to *The Human Condition*, which in many ways foregrounds the entire text, starts with a glaring critique of technology and scientific progress. The very first sentence of the text sets the tone:

In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe, where for some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the stars. To be sure, the man-made satellite was no moon or star, no heavenly body which could follow its circling path for a time span that to us mortals, bound by earthly time, lasts from eternity to eternity. Yet, for a time it managed to stay in the skies; it dwelt and moved in the proximity of the heavenly bodies as though it had been admitted tentatively to their sublime company.

This event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom, would have been greeted with unmitigated joy if it had not been for the uncomfortable military and political circumstances attending it. But, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from earth toward the skies, could behold the thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment on earth." And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, unwittingly echoed the extraordinary

greatest single factor in this constant increase since its inception has been the organization of laboring, visible in the so-called division of labor, which preceded the industrial revolution; even the mechanization of labor processes, the second greatest factor in labor's productivity, is based upon it" (HC, 47). To understand why it is increasingly difficult to perform action, it is necessary to understand the rise of the social, and to preserve the public and private so that freedom can be enjoyed.

### **The Rise of the Social**

Arendt begins the section "The Rise of the Social" in Chapter two of *The Human*

*Condition* by writing:

The emergence of society – the rise of housekeeping, its activities, its problems, and organizational devices – from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between the private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen (HC, 38).

It is evident that Arendt believes the 'social' to be something destructive, stating that it emerges from a shadowy interior and blurs the private and the political, which ultimately leads to a society where action cannot be exercised. The public realm allows for a free exchange of ideas, where decisions are made through egalitarian discourse, not through

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line which, more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia's great scientists: "Mankind will not remain bound to the ground forever" (HC, 1).

In these opening paragraphs, Arendt is referring to Sputnik, the world's first satellite launched into space. While Arendt is speaking to this great human feat, she is prophesying and, in a sense, cautioning against humankind's obsession with space and the desire, or perhaps ultimate need, to travel to other planets. Arendt knew then the power of technology, the problem it presented in philosophy, and what it would mean for humanity down the line. This is not to say Arendt opposes scientific progress, but she is untrusting of what humans will do with technology as it progresses. Because Arendt believes in the 'banality of evil,' as she puts it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she does not necessarily trust humans to always use technology for good. It will inevitably slip out of control and be used for evil.

violence or force. When this realm becomes blurred, it becomes threatened. Arendt believes people are unfulfilled because we live in a world where we are alienated from our work and from others. One quickly learns that the social is some sort of entity that grew out of modernization and keeps people alienated. It is used almost exclusively in a negative tone. 'Social' is no longer the adjective used to describe people who enjoy socializing or an issue relating to society. Rather, it is a term used by Arendt to refer to a specific phenomenon.

In her paper "Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social," Hanna Pitkin, a feminist interpreter of Arendt, notes that Arendt is remembered for her cerebral concepts of action, politics and freedom:

Her greatness centered on the constellation of three interrelated concepts that she treated as almost synonymous: action, politics and freedom. Though we all use these words, she thought, we do not really understand their meaning because we have lost the experiences to which they correspond. She regarded these experiences as the most valuable that human beings could have – called them our "lost treasure" – and tried to restore the full significance of these words so that we might recover the experiences as well (Pitkin in Honig, 51).

Arendt believes that the reason humans become susceptible to totalitarianism and other forms of doom is due to the loss of these concepts – the lost treasure. "By these complex, interrelated terms Arendt meant, first of all, the human capacity for creativity, spontaneity, doing the unexpected, launching something unprecedented and valuable" (Pitkin in Honig, 51). We know as human beings that this creativity and spontaneity is what makes us happy. Our happiest moments come from creating, acting spontaneously and courageously, taking leaps of faith, and ending up somewhere unexpected. In addition to making us happy and actualized, these concepts keep us safe. Safe from our

own madness and sorrow, surely, but safe in our political community, as well. This lost treasure, for Arendt, also refers to being critical of one's leaders and systems and maintaining agency, rather than becoming a voiceless mass. "Arendt stressed our collective powers and responsibilities, and focused on politics and public life. Real freedom, she held, meant jointly bringing our human capacity for initiative to bear on what's wrong in our present arrangements" (Pitkin in Honig, 52). This is to say, we must use our human capacities to remain critical and change the world around us, especially when something is going awry. Pitkin says that, while these are some of Arendt's most valuable contributions, these concepts are not crucial for understanding the social. As such, Pitkin's focus is not on what Arendt considered valuable and lost but, rather, what is harmful and what is very present (Pitkin in Honig, 52). For Pitkin, that is the rise of what Arendt deems 'the social.'

Pitkin writes that "Arendt thinks we moderns are in a bad fix, but if one asks whose fault that is, the answer seems to be, the social" (Pitkin in Honig, 52). When one examines the verbs that are often paired with the noun 'social,' one gets a better sense of its meaning. In *The Human Condition*, the social is said to; absorb, embrace, devour, emerge, rise, grow, enter, intrude, conquer, constitute, control, pervert, transform, impose, demand, exclude, try to cheat, or act under a guise (Pitkin in Honig, 53). It is apparently the social that keeps us from our lost freedom and yet, we do not seem to have much of a choice as to whether we are a part of it. In the prologue of *The Human Condition*, Arendt invokes our capacity for critical thought by proposing that we must "think what we are doing" (HC, 5). While this is good advice, and it is a central theme of *The Human Condition*, her conception of the social would suggest that we cannot do anything to help ourselves out of this situation because our troubles are the work of the

social (Pitkin in Honig, 53).<sup>11</sup> Pitkin describes Arendt as a thinker whose main effort is to teach us our powers, but Arendt then absolves us of our responsibility when coining the concept of the social. Pitkin writes “When and how did Arendt come to think about society in a manner diametrically opposed to, and undermining, her best teaching? (Pitkin in Honig, 53). But this is a simplification of her thinking. As always with Arendt, it is necessary to reassert our agency in a way that will help to resolve the dilemma. The answer is usually to keep thinking.

The social is a markedly modern problem. Pitkin notes that Arendt never really defines her terms, at least never with one explicit definition. Arendt notes that the concept of society derives from the Latin word *societas*, which means “an alliance between people for a specific purpose” (*HC*, 23). “The emergence of the social realm... is a relatively new phenomenon,” no older than “the modern age” (*HC*, 28). By modern, Arendt means not ancient. She uses the Ancient Greeks as an exemplary model. The Ancient Greeks kept all natural necessity – meaning activities concerned with survival and the needs of the body – in the privacy of the household. The derivation of the word “economics” comes from the Greek term for household. Arendt postulates that in modern times, economics became public. Therefore, society is “the public organization of the life process” (*HC*, 46). The rise of the social, then, refers to the “development of a complex trade, division of labor, a market, eventually the whole extensive, centralized economic system we know, in which people are profoundly interdependent, yet no one is in charge” (Pitkin in Honig, 54). Essentially, the social refers to the rise of commercial

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<sup>11</sup> The ‘social’ in some ways is meant to encompass commercial society, i.e. capitalism. Mark Fisher coined the term ‘capitalist realism’ which refers to the idea that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (*Capitalist Realism*). In some senses, the two concepts are comparable. Arendt says, at times, that there is nothing that can be done about the social, and the only option is to submit.



society in early modernity. When housekeeping goes large scale – meaning when the private becomes public – natural necessity can become dangerous. It reaches beyond the control of any one human, and control is assumed by a mass or a blob. People become confronted with the consequences of what they do, as if they were the work of some alien force (Pitkin in Honig, 54).

Seyla Benhabib also points to Arendt's concept of the social being the rise of commercial society. She tells us, like Pitkin, that it refers to mass society, when "housekeeping goes large scale" and when production is no longer for a community's immediate use. (Pitkin in Honig, 54). Benhabib describes that Arendt in one way is "a nostalgic and antimodernist thinker, who sees modernity as the decline of the public sphere the decline of the public sphere of politics and the emergence of an amorphous, anonymous, uniformizing reality that she calls "the social"" (Benhabib, 22). She calls the social "glorified national housekeeping" which "displaces the concern with the political...from the hearts and minds of men" (Benhabib, 23). Benhabib's critique of Arendt's concept of the social is that it does not account for all of history. When Arendt is referring to the pure form of the "public sphere" she is referring to the Greek polis. If the social is a creation of modernity, what happened during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or early modernity? Arendt does not address these periods because they do pertain directly to her argument. It is important to remember that Arendt is charting a conjectural history to help us understand a societal problem in modernity. She is not attempting to create an accurate historical narrative. Benhabib notes that the social must have been caused by something. But she notes again that the only example Arendt gives us is that it emerged from "the shadowy interior of the household" (Benhabib, 23). This supports my argument that, although Arendt is not directly criticizing gender roles as the

cause of the social, she is criticizing conformity and the structure of the household and, therefore, there is a link.

Benhabib suggests the social encompasses three things. First, the growth of the capitalist exchange economy, second, mass society, and third, sociability, meaning the quality of life in civil society and civic associations (Benhabib, 23). Mass society is marked by behavior, rather than action. Behavior is the “ideal typical activity of individuals insofar as they are bearers of social roles, that is, bureaucrat, the businessman, the executive, and so on” (Benhabib, 25). Action, alternatively, is individuating and individual behavior; it reveals the self rather than concealing him or her behind the social mask (Benhabib, 25). Behavior, the activity carried out by a mass, refers to conformism, social norms and mores, manners and etiquette. This, no doubt, encompasses gender norms. Because the social also refers to civil society, it refers to the idea that there are artificial interactions that transpire under a social contract. It can also refer to the norms of high society, as in the case of Rahel Varnhagen. The social imposes expectations upon people, and urges them to behave in a certain, accepted way. Under this structure, biases form against anyone who does not follow this structure, which allows for prejudice and discrimination. Arendt is criticizing socially constructed, limiting norms for anyone. This criticism on the part of Arendt allows for space to criticize prescribed gender roles for men and women.

Pitkin asserts that if the social is people conducting themselves in such a way where the consequences of the collective are not within any one person’s control, then politics ought to be the effort to control these consequences. “Politics then, would mean collective self-governance, supplying the body-politic with a head to reassert human control over the socioeconomic forces generated by the mutual dealing of large numbers

of people driven by the biological necessities of their bodies” (Pitkin in Honig, 54). However, this is not an adequate solution because it replaces the *paterfamilias* with an administrative state. One of Arendt’s criticisms of modern government is that it functions too much like a household, where the patriarch rules. She worries that the modern nation-state is too much like a family, and society thus “demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family” (Pitkin in Honig, 54). This is an issue for three reasons. For one, a family is a biological unit, and it is the job of one person to tend to the family’s biological needs. As such, society would constitute the public organization of the life process itself. Second, it is assumed that a family has one collective interest and opinion, which should not occur in society because society is made up of individuals. Third, like family, society is concerned with behaviour (Pitkin in Honig, 55). This presents a problem, as society will make demands to regulate peoples’ conduct:

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action... Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement (*HC*, 40).

Based on this passage, one can surmise that, like a parent, society forces its occupants to behave, to regulate and stifle individuality. Using this analogy, it is easy to see why action is not possible in the social realm. Pitkin cites Arendt: “The best ‘social conditions,’ that is, the most ‘social’ of social conditions, ‘are those under which it is possible to lose one’s identity’” (Pitkin in Honig, 55). Action and identity are inextricably linked. Action can only be performed in public space, and action is central in expressing and affirming one’s identity.

Pitkin analyzes Arendt's representation of the social not only in *The Human Condition*, but also in *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*. In many ways, the villain of this text is high society. Arendt's doctoral thesis was on love in the thought of Saint Augustine, but her *habilitationsschrift* (the work one must complete to teach at German universities) was a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, an eighteenth-century German-Jewish woman and salonnière who struggled with her Jewish identity and made it her life goal to abandon this identity to assimilate into high society. Arendt began working on this text while she was living in exile in Paris. Arendt's intellectual interests were, naturally, shaped by her lived experience. A young woman whose educational background was in philosophy and theology soon switched her sights to political theory and theorizing identity when her life drastically changed, and she was under persecution for her ethnic religion. Some go as far as to say that *Rahel Varnhagen* is somewhat autobiographical on the part of Arendt. Arendt documents Varnhagen's life according to letters and tells her story as Varnhagen would have herself. It is evident that Arendt felt a kinship towards Varnhagen and was able to relate to her as a Jew and a woman. It is evident when reading the biography that Varnhagen's gender posed just as much of a problem as her ethnic religion, because assimilating perhaps would not have been as necessary if it were not for her womanhood. Varnhagen's family, the Levins, lost their fortune when she was a girl. As a woman, Varnhagen's only way to secure economic stability is to marry a wealthy man. She attempts to marry a gentile aristocrat, but his family forbids him to do so because she is a Jew, so Varnhagen begins to host a salon. Varnhagen ultimately converts to Christianity, changes her name, and marries a gentile. On her deathbed, Varnhagen regrets having spent her entire life trying to assimilate and denounce her Jewishness: "The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame,

which was the misery and misfortune of my life – having been born a Jewess – this I would on no account now wish to have missed.” This sentiment is the central theme of the text. Arendt seems most interested in the aspect of reclamation of Varnhagen’s Jewish identity.

The central concepts of *Rahel Varnhagen* are of *pariah* and *parvenu*. To be a pariah means to be an outcast, defined as inferior through no choice of one’s own, but through birth. Being a *pariah* does not always have to be an unhappy existence. One might prefer to live their life alongside other pariahs, rather than in mainstream society, because this is where they feel most at home. But if a *pariah* does not wish to live excluded from the rest of society, they can choose to become a *parvenu*, which essentially means to socially climb into mainstream society. The sole desire of a *parvenu* is to be accepted. “Succeeding as a parvenu requires internalizing the standards of those to whom one would assimilate” (Pitkin in Honig, 60). This means that the *parvenu* must come to believe whatever it is the group which they are trying to break into believes. “In an anti-Semitic society, a successful parvenu must become an anti-Semite” (Pitkin in Honig, 61). Varnhagen would have done anything she could to not be Jewish. She said she was born not rich, not beautiful, and Jewish, the latter being her greatest shame, misery and misfortune (*RV*, 25). What Arendt is really getting at in this text is that Varnhagen’s journey of assimilation was miserable. A desire to terminate one’s own immutable characteristics becomes a life-long obsession, and to constantly pretend to be somebody one is not requires a painful degree of discipline. It never becomes easier or more natural to act as *parvenu*; one’s entire life will be a lie. “Every personal wish and reaction must be subordinated to the one, central goal of acceptance, which requires carving what ‘they’ – not oneself – regard as valuable” (Pitkin in Honig, 63). In the

process of this experience comes the greatest cost of all: the loss of reality. Pitkin writes: “For most of her life, Varnhagen’s ‘consciousness of reality was dependent on confirmation by others’” (Pitkin in Honig, 63). In this sense, one’s life is only affirmed once validated by others. This is Arendt’s overarching criticism in *Rahel Varnhagen*. She believes that the price of being *parvenu* is too high. However, her commentary goes even deeper. When one craves acceptance in society and resigns themselves to the desire that they would rather be like the majority than have their own distinct and individual attributes, they are consigning themselves to the blob or the social. They have lost all possibility of exerting action. While the issue of *parvenu* in *Rahel Varnhagen* is specific to a Jewish woman trying to assimilate in the eighteenth century, there is a sense in which all anyone ever wants is to be accepted in society. This is the problem with the social realm. While action is testifying to others in public, acting as *parvenu* is testifying to others with the goal of acceptance, so it does not involve disclosing one’s true self. All singularity amongst plurality is lost.

Arendt may have been fascinated by Varnhagen’s story or, as Pitkin puts it, “Varnhagen’s retrospective self-criticism contained a lesson that Arendt wanted to teach” (Pitkin in Honig, 64). However, this does not mean that Arendt identified with it. Arendt did not see her Jewishness as a misfortune, nor did she wish to be accepted by society. In fact, she cautions against the desire for acceptance. Unfortunately, it is unsurprising that to be a woman, in many cases, is to be a *parvenu*. Women must act deceitfully, straddling the line of cleverness and refinement, but never being too intelligent. Sometimes the group which women *parvenus* are trying to be accepted by is the group of men. It is important to keep in mind, here, that the tenets of equality feminism indicate that the way to achieve equality is by mirroring the traits of men. As

well, heterosexual women must appear attractive to men to secure themselves good lives. Woman as *parvenu* can never let on that she might actually be intellectually equal or intellectually superior to the men around her.

It was not until 1933 that Arendt felt it was time to somewhat abandon her intellectual pursuits and apply her knowledge, due to the political realities surrounding her. “I no longer felt that [I] could simply be an observer.” Arendt underwent a consciousness-raising experience, being forced to question what she and others were doing. Heidegger becoming a Nazi was a prime example as it revealed to Arendt that being confined to a life of academic pursuits can be sometimes problematic. Arendt was able to be objective and realize that academia is a type of high society, and she was critical of this, as much as she was absorbed in it. Pitkin writes: “The isolation and abstraction required their professional thinking blinds them to the simple, ordinary realities that are obvious to everyone else that shape our political lives” (Pitkin in Honig, 70). As such, while in France, Arendt took a break from academic life and decided to offer up her services to take care of Jewish refugee children. She assumed more typically feminine and traditionally Jewish work. She stated that her “Personal problem was political, purely political! I wanted to do practical work – exclusively and only Jewish work (Pitkin in Honig, 71). For Arendt, political is practical. Political and social are diametrically opposed to one another. If political means practical, then social means *parvenu*, assimilationist, impractical, unrealistic, and overly intellectual.

Using Pitkin’s framework, one comes to understand that the social refers to many things. Pitkin may use the term ‘blob,’ but the social also refers to the modern era, post-industrialization, an immersion in technology, a blurring of the public and private spheres, mass society, a susceptibility to isolation, loneliness, alienation and

subsequently totalitarianism. For our purposes, however, it is important to keep top of mind how the social specifically affects women. It might refer to how women are forced to act deceitfully, to ensure their attractiveness to men. To act as *parvenu*, women must be smart enough to break into the public and professional sphere but not so smart as to threaten the men around them, and emulate the mandatory manners and customs becoming of women in high society. The social also represents a gendered division of labour, where women traditionally labor in private, men disproportionately occupy and work in public, and where there is an overall loss of action. “The parvenu’s experience and the social itself are further characterized by individual isolation and consequent helplessness, loss of reality and natural pleasures, and meaninglessness, all of which sounds a lot like the experiences of the suburban housewife, particularly in the 1950s” (Pitkin in Honig, 78). I return to the idea of the *parvenu* in the third chapter, as I more closely examine identity in *Rahel Varnhagen*. But for now, I continue to explore the public realm as a jumping-off point for identity. Public space is needed to affirm and express one’s identity and, as Pitkin illuminates, the social is a repressor of identity.

### **Loneliness of the Social**

The loneliness and alienation felt in the social sphere help set the stage for totalitarianism. When humans are not able to disclose themselves to one another in the space of appearance, they are disengaged from one another and, as such, it is easier for them to become massed and susceptible to totalitarian domination. Arendt is quite adamant that all people be granted access to the public sphere because, for her, this is a prerequisite for citizenship. Therefore, if one is a citizen, if one has suffrage, one is entitled and encouraged to act in the public sphere. However, there are a few reasons



why this does not always work in a liberal democracy. In her article “Another Origin of Totalitarianism: Arendt on the Loneliness of Liberal Citizens,” Jennifer Gaffney theorizes that liberal citizenship produces loneliness, thus rendering moderns more susceptible to totalitarian domination. She cites Arendt who claims that loneliness “epitomizes the experience of living together in the modern age. Symptomatic of the feeling of no longer belonging to a world, lonely individuals are unable to see themselves or others as who they are in their singularity” (Gaffney, 2). Gaffney is pointing out a paradox in Arendt’s thinking. Arendt believes fundamentally that all humans are equal and have an equal capacity to act. But at the same time, Arendt claims this notion of universality can be dangerous. If we as liberal citizens are all the same, if we are reduced to mere rights holders alone, then we are unable to see how we are different, unique, distinct, or singular.

Gaffney’s thesis is that readers of Arendt often misinterpret her as emphasizing the notion of the “right to have rights.” Arendt, instead, offers that political exclusion is what makes citizens susceptible to totalitarian domination yet, an expansion of rights in the private sphere is not going to remedy this political exclusion. Rather than granting citizens the right to pursue individual interests in the isolation of private life, Arendt insists that all citizens be returned to the public sphere where they can appear to one another in the fullness of their humanity as irreducibly unique and take shared responsibility for reclaiming the significance of the world – the place where politics occurs (Gaffney, 2). One of the core tenets of Arendt’s thought is that belonging to a political community is a universal human right, seeing that she witnessed first-hand people having their right to belong to a political community taken away from them, herself included. This is profound because Arendt means all people of all genders, races,

ethnicities, and religions, have the right to be a citizen of a sovereign state. But this right is not merely the right to avoid statelessness, it has to be an example of positive liberty, where the right to belong is granted and facilitated to citizens. The reason for this is that citizens need a space to engage, where they can exercise individual initiative. “Arendt’s concern for political belonging turns on her view that it is only by working with others in the space of politics to enact our freedom that we renew the meaningfulness of the world, initiating something anew in order to save it from “its ‘normal’ natural ruin”” (Gaffney, 5). For Arendt, freedom is not pre-political, it is not something that is part of human nature, it is given. According to Gaffney, loneliness is so persistent in Arendt’s work because it is integral for clarifying the stakes involved in citizenship and political belonging (Gaffney, 5). “Political life thus engenders an authentic sense of human belonging; it opens a space in which human beings become more visible to one another in their irreducible uniqueness and brings the meaningful reality of a common world into reality” (Gaffney, 5). Deprivation of this political existence results in what Arendt calls world-alienation (*HC*, 251).

People experience loneliness when they are isolated and alienated, because they do not have access to public space. When people have access to public space, when it is secured and provided, people are not lonely and, therefore, they are less susceptible to totalitarian domination. It is important to note that although all people are plagued with loneliness in the modern age, there is a special form of loneliness reserved for those who live their life in the private/domestic sphere, in the so-called “shadowy interior,” labouring, without access to action (*HC*, 38). While it is true that all people can feel the phenomenon of world-alienation in the modern age, when one inserts the reality of sexism, one finds that women experience this phenomenon more often. Using this logic,

women will only have true citizenship when access to public life is provided to them, and when they are given the opportunity to perform action. Arendt suggests that solitude does play an important part of political life, as claimed by the Ancients or even thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Solitude allows for people to cultivate their capacity for thinking. Therefore, there is a difference between solitude and isolation.

This brings us back to Arendt's emphasis on political belonging. If one does not belong to a political community of some kind – or, perhaps a better way of thinking about it, any community that does not centre around labouring for ourselves or others – one will slip into loneliness, becoming more susceptible to totalitarianism, as one is no longer a political actor with voice or agency to stop it.

As with most of Arendt's work, it is possible to apply this line of thinking to Jews in Germany living under the Third Reich and, perhaps, even more broadly. For the purpose of my inquiry, I will apply this line of thinking to women who labour in their homes for the purpose of caring for others, such as children and men. When women are too busy performing domestic work, their lives do not belong to themselves; they do not have a chance to bring their singularity into relief. When one is obsessed with the survival of others, or even the survival of themselves, there is no opportunity to have one's identity affirmed by others. One is reduced to caretaker. This is what Arendt means when she says that the public/political sphere has been erased. It has become oversaturated with labor activities. "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by trusting the trustworthy company of my equals" (*O*, 477). While she may not be speaking about women directly, she is signalling that it is not healthy, productive, or safe to live this way.

In addition to her condemnation of the social sphere for priming people for totalitarian domination, Arendt is providing us with a prescient critique of a gendered division of labour. This argument, when applied to women draws them out of the shadowy interior and demands that they be inserted into the public sphere where they can confirm their identity amongst equals. For as long as women remain isolated, they are more susceptible to patriarchal tyranny. As Arendt mentions several times over, for totalitarianism to take place, the masses must already be atomized and isolated to the point of loneliness. While we all live under the rule of patriarchy, we are massed into believing that assuming gender roles, and a gendered division of labour, is the accepted way to live. I assert that because we are under this rule, we are challenged with being voiceless and powerless to make a shift.

Increasingly, there is a general understanding that loneliness can create an environment where totalitarian forces can take hold. As Gaffney describes it, loneliness leaves “individuals in exile from themselves and the radical singularity that is definitive of being a human being” (Gaffney, 11). When we are lonely, we are more desperate for the feeling of togetherness. Totalitarian movements, like National Socialism, promise togetherness. Totalitarianism, Arendt believes, is an unprecedented form of government, symptomatic of the modern age. “Unlike tyrannical rule, totalitarian government is not arbitrary and lawless but instead purports to be lawful in the purest sense, executing the law into the standards of right and wrong for individual behaviour” (Gaffney, 11). As such, it destroys all human plurality, pressing all people together to create one people. “By pressing isolated individuals together, terror ensures that the masses, no longer able to recognize themselves or others in their singularity, come to believe that their particular existence is meaningful only insofar as it advances the species of the whole”

(Gaffney, 12). In this sense, people are only driven by their sameness, their biological qualities. “By effectively outlawing human plurality, totalitarian terror ensures that the stream of necessity governed by natural or historical processes remains uninterrupted by an unforeseeable or spontaneous human act” (Gaffney, 12). Essentially, this state paralyzes human beings to the point of complacency, to the point that no one will ever do anything unexpected as they are under complete control.

Consequently, totalitarianism not only outlaws human plurality, but also enforces convention. That is why fascist governments, such as the Nazi government, and other far-right governments, enforce traditional mores such as strict gender roles. When all families assume the same basic structure and all people act according to their predetermined biological destiny, people conform, they become subdued and, thus, easier to control. “Totalitarian ideology distinguishes itself, however, in that it is driven not by an idea, such as dialectical materialism or racism, but instead by the coercive force of the logical process itself” (Gaffney, 12). Because totalitarianism also appeals to a sort of logicity, humans lose their own sense of reality, because they are told explicitly what is to be considered as true and false. In addition to this sort of prescribed life being dangerous, living a life without diversity, spontaneity, and beauty, would be the most dreadful existence of all, and of this, Arendt is deeply aware.

Arendt does not propose a so-called solution to the problem of totalitarianism, nor of loneliness, for that matter. But, according to Gaffney, she does put forth a theory that should help us to avoid this phenomenon. As citizens, we all have a collective responsibility to preserve and renew the public sphere and the political realm. Just as we have a right to be a citizen, according to Arendt, we have the responsibility to exercise this right and reclaim the world we share (*HC*, 7). I assert that this is part of the contract

of citizenship. We are granted political belonging only if we help to uphold the realm of politics, the space where freedom can occur and where we disclose ourselves to one another in our radical singularity and perform action. And this goes for all citizens.

### **Agency**

It is critical for understanding action that identity can only be drawn out in public space. But there are more criteria necessary for exerting action and drawing out identity, making action performable for all people. It is important for a feminist analysis to recognize the ways in which agency and action are somewhat interchangeable. In her article “Hannah Arendt, Agency and Public Space,” Andrea Thuma focuses on the concept of agency in Arendt’s discussion of public space. Agency is located within the public realm but, Thuma picks up on the issue that many other theorists of Arendt skirt which is that: agency is gatekept and not everyone has the freedom to exercise it. Agency is linked to the concept of natality and plurality. Natality refers to beginning, and the notion that with the birth of every human being, something new is brought into the world. Plurality refers to the fact that we are born into a world occupied by other human beings. “Plurality is located within public spaces – only within their borders are action and speech possible” (Thuma, 2). Thuma notes that for Arendt, freedom is enabled by natality meaning, the capacity to make new beginnings. “It is the human freedom to act, to speak, and to create shared spaces through interaction with others” (Thuma, 2). This interaction naturally requires plurality, and plurality necessitates that public space be filled with an assortment of people, all of whom are different. Thuma then determines that the political refers to freedom realized through interaction with others in public spaces (Thuma, 2).

Public space, however, is not a natural consequence of human nature. Rather, it is established by a “human web of relationships” developed by continuous new beginnings (*HC*, 184). Arendt holds that there is nothing natural about public space, it is actually quite artificial (Thuma, 2). As such, it needs to be secured through human agency. It also needs to be stabilized through institutions and laws. Institutionalization will give public space durability, but the task of stabilizing freedom through institutionalization is most challenging (Thuma, 2). As stated, the erasure of public space is a consequence of modern life, and Arendt blames the disappearance on a general lack of interest in public life. The descent of the value of action in contrast to the value of labor and work, is highly destructive to public life. As a fulfilled human life cannot be situated in the private realm, Arendt is interested in establishing polities that open the space for political freedom: “Polities which constitute this space itself instead of only providing a limited public sphere to mediate between government and citizens,” thus enabling the fullest human life (Thuma, 3).

According to Thuma, the four criteria on which agency is contingent are all connected to public space. The first is what she calls subject visibility which refers to the subject’s need to appear in public space (Thuma, 4). “Only within the borders of public space is it possible for her to appear before others” (Thuma, 4). In this sense, being requires being seen. This appearance has existential effects for a person as it helps them to affirm their identity, because they learn to understand themselves the way others understand them (*HC*, 50). Arendt believes acts of testifying to others in public are some of the most authentic moments humans can experience. Speaking to others in a symposium setting is the truest type of disclosure as the speaker will get to express that which they have been ruminating on while alone in solitude. Thinking in solitude is

important, but none of these thoughts are realized until they are spoken. For Arendt, dwelling on thoughts in private for too long can be dangerous. Humans must be drawn out and articulate their thoughts (Thuma, 4). Thuma notes that this protects against the “impermanence of human life” (Thuma, 4). Human life is finite, however, acting in public can have a commemorative quality that will outlast the speaker or doer even once they die. Public space is, therefore, “a space for commemoration, for the remembrance of deeds” (Thuma, 4). Humans must appear before others to be recognized. “Through acting in public, which means becoming visible to the others around her, the subject’s identity is exposed and revealed” (Thuma, 4).

This revelation of identity cannot occur from self-reflection alone, which raises a very interesting question for feminist analysis. Thuma is essentially saying that one does not know their own identity until it is validated by others, which could potentially raise issues of concern for women. The notion that a woman is only a person once she has been given validation by men or by other women around her is troublesome. Yet, that is not what Thuma nor Arendt are saying. They are more so saying that a woman becomes a citizen only when her visibility is disclosed and revealed. She is not to be hidden away to ruminate over thoughts. She ought to share these thoughts with others, which has the potential to broaden the thoughts which are held by society writ large.

Beyond simply being seen, one must be granted the capacity to interact and communicate to have agency, which is Thuma’s second criteria for agency (Thuma, 4). The assumption that all people can equally interact and communicate may seem basic, but it is wrong to assume that people across all lines can interact and communicate equally. “Even though Arendt emphasizes the significance of political equality in the public space as a crucial condition for interaction, she does not pay attention to factors



which may limit this kind of equality, e.g., social, cultural or communicative differences” (Thuma, 4). One needs to be familiarized with the proper codes of communication, and if one lacks these codes due to an imbalance in education, language, or class, one might retreat from shared communicative spaces. “Furthermore, Arendt’s emphasis on equality makes others’ willingness and ability to enter into interaction decisive: Exclusion from a “community of action” can occur through the negation of the Other as an equal co-agent or through an intentional or unintentional exclusion from shared patterns of action” (Thuma, 4). Therefore, withdrawing or preventing access to a public space or to opportunities of interaction results in the denial of agency. So, to ensure the capacity to interact and communicate, one must start with educational equality, and promote the common codes of interaction to all.

The third criterion for agency is freedom. Because freedom is linked to natality and plurality, Thuma envisions freedom to mean, specifically, the capacity for making a beginning, the capacity for initiative (Thuma, 5). Arendt says, “To act, in its most general sense, means to initiate, to begin” (*HC*, 177). This can also mean the freedom from outside forces or, as Arendt often puts it, the freedom from necessity. The reason this raises such a contention for feminism is because women are not typically free from necessity, meaning that they would not have access to freedom. “This line in her work has provoked much dismay and criticism by feminist readers who took Arendt’s distinction between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity to be congruent with the distinction between the private and the public and their respective gendered “inhabitants”” (Thuma, 5).

This reading of Arendt would hold that women should not appear in the realm of freedom because they are bound to the realm of necessity. But this is not Thuma’s

interpretation, nor is it mine. Thuma is hinting at the notion of choice feminism. Choice feminism refers to the idea that women should be able to make any choice they wish to express themselves as women or live as women, even if that means choosing to take on the role of performing caring labour, because choosing to do this is exercising choice. This fundamentally deproblematizes women's exclusion from the public sphere, if they are the arbiter of their own exclusion, and opt out of the public sphere by exercising agency:

It is the agent's initiative, not the formal ascription of her actions to the public or the private sphere, which transforms actions into acts of freedom or of necessity. Hence, the agent's freedom is dependent neither on one's assignment to a specific realm nor on relations of dependence or individual sovereignty, but lies in her capacity to change her situation and, ultimately, in her decision to act (Thuma, 5).

If the agent initiates her own life, free from external constraints, then she is free. The problem of course is that one is never truly free from external constraints. The reason that the choice for caring labour is even an option is because it is what has been laid out historically as the most promising option, and the only option women should want to choose. Thuma offers another qualifier to this criterion, suggesting that there ought to be an alternative option that is just as promising. Operating in the public sphere is what grants true freedom, but it will never appear as the most appealing option because the barriers to entry in public for women are much higher and much more onerous, particularly for women with children. Thuma calls this the freedom to choose action or non-action (Thuma, 5). There is inherent judgment in this line of thinking as one is either an agent or not an agent. If she chooses to be a non-agent, she is exercising freedom, but she fundamentally lacks or misses out on a whole facet of human life, which causes exclusion. Thuma maintains, however, that so long as there is a space of

alternative possibilities, there is freedom. “Thus it is not the lack of independence but the lack of initiative or of opportunity to initiate action that renders humans unfree” (Thuma, 5). Ultimately, the capacity for initiative still relies on the assumption of equality. Women can choose whatever fate they desire, but for them to be granted this opportunity, they must be given the same amount of choice as all other agents.

Worldly attachment is the last criteria for agency, according to Thuma. Worldly attachment is when agents intervene on the course of the world (Thuma, 5). “Agents are capable of taking hold of the world, they are able to intervene in the course of things and to change it, and thereby “weave in” their own, personal history into the history of their time and place” (Thuma, 5). This requires having an interest in the world. This “care for the world” is very important for Arendt (Thuma, 5). Some critics of Arendt have called this sort of worldly attachment elitist, suggesting that a care for the world is contingent on education and background.<sup>12</sup> Once again, Arendt believes that the capacity to care for the world is egalitarian. Everyone is equally capable of this sort of care as it is not necessarily contingent on background. It is, however, unevenly distributed. Arendt acknowledges that not everyone is interested in being politically involved and she claims that only those interested in involvement should be (Thuma, 5). This statement seems contradictory considering that she states interest in public life has been lost so, theoretically, not enough people remain interested in the world. She says, however, that

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that in her later adult life in America, Arendt led a relatively cosmopolitan life, hosting dinner parties and interacting with other academics of a certain echelon. Even still, an argument can be made that this practice was egalitarian. Her dinner parties were about friends conversing, and friendship has a subversive quality for Arendt. Parsing what was happening in the world with friends, helped Arendt to understand the world around her. This setting is a perfect stage for action to be displayed. It is also reminiscent of the salons hosted by one of Arendt’s favourite figures, Rahel Varnhagen, which were a hub for displays of action. For more information on Arendt’s famous dinner parties, I recommend the online article “The radical political power of friendship” by Alissa Wilkinson.

we should put our trust in those who are, as they are authentically interested and attached to the course of the world.

Agency is simply another way to view action. Both agency and action are contingent on public space. Therefore, a denial of public space is a denial of action. In public, agents disclose themselves to one another, thus affirming their identities, and where they communicate and interact with one another. No space in which identities are hidden is a public space. To make public space open to all, these codes of communication and interaction must be shared with all. Genuine public spaces must offer alternatives as in there is a choice to opt in or out of them. However, as Arendt would insist, it is crucial that we do opt into them. “And finally, such a space must be a “ground” which attaches the individual to the world around her, offers her space for action, and thereby enables her to intervene in it” (Thuma, 6). Thuma offers some real-world applications of her criteria for agency by inserting the reality of sexism. She notes that, starting at a young age, girls are socialized differently than boys in terms of their “grasp” on the world:

For instance, the motion experience of boys is fostered by clothing and toys which demand movement and exploration or by encouraging them to test their bodies, their strength and skillfulness in the world around them and in interaction with it. The “worldly” experience of girls is quite different. Female toddlers learn to occupy less space in the world around them and to approach it less actively and explorative. Throughout their childhood and youth, justified by the presumed fragility of their clothing, their bodies, and, in many cultures, their sexual integrity, the space of movement for girls is limited (Thuma, 7).

Women are taught from the moment of birth to occupy less space in the world and to explore it less actively. This fact does not lend itself very well to the occupation of public space by women. In Western culture, women are taught to take great care of their

appearances, but not necessarily to take hold of the world around them. As such, it is more difficult for women to meet Thuma's criteria of agency. One finds that there is a link between socialization of gender and the social. Both lead to a loss of public space. But by using Thuma's framework, namely, the criteria of appearance and visibility, the capacity to communicate and interact, the freedom to initiate, and the need for worldly attachment, one finds a new way to think about agency and, perhaps, can make agency in public space more widespread.

### **Women and the Public Realm**

One might say it is feminist or, at the very least egalitarian, of Arendt to propel all citizens into the public sphere through her action system of politics – the insistence that all humans exercise action as a determinant factor of their own humanity. The issue Arendt is unable to reconcile, however, is that there are barriers preventing all humans, specifically, women, from accessing the public realm. The flaw with Arendt's universal concepts is that they do not always account for legitimate social relations of power. The idea that women have the same capacity to act and engage in the public realm is liberating and gives us a rich conception of what public life could be like but, to date, no proposal has been set forth to accomplish this ideal. For centuries, feminists have struggled with the question of how to insert women into the public sphere and make it an attractive option for them. Certain feminist theorists have come up with ideas like providing wages for housework, because then at least caring labour would have social value. Perhaps men would be more apt to provide caring labour and assist on the private/domestic front if the labour they conducted at home was remunerated. There are also socialized childcare options that have been explored and initiated but it has not

changed society's assumption that women ought to be the ones providing caring labour because it is still largely women providing childcare. If working women are still responsible for caring labour and housework, they continue to conduct this activity even once they enter the professional sphere. Therefore, no matter how much a woman may want to work and perform action, if she does so, she is committing herself to double the effort of her male counterparts. Fundamentally, in this arrangement, women participating in the public sphere is not equal, because their responsibilities are not equal. It is pointless, then, to condemn women's choice either way. While it may have the ultimate result of liberation if more women occupied the public sphere, what would compel them to enter? A solution remains to be found. Arendt cannot be held accountable for solving a problem that no one else has been able to solve but, by offering that there must be a space of alternatives for women, her position is clear.

While the solution for making the public sphere equally accessible to women remains to be determined, Arendt helps us to understand a crucial piece of women's liberation: the equal capacity of women to act despite their biological difference. She posits that women's biological differences are irrelevant, and that women's denial from public space is entirely socially constructed. I have previously mentioned that Arendt falls into a similar camp as Woolf and Wollstonecraft when it comes to the idea that inequality is socially constructed, but a particularly compelling quote that embodies this idea comes from Harriet Taylor Mill:

There is no inherent reason or necessity that all women should voluntarily choose to devote their lives to one animal function and its consequences. Numbers of women are wives and mothers only because there is no other career open to them, no other occupation for their feelings or activities. Every improvement in their education, and enlargement of their faculties, everything which renders them more qualified for any other mode of life, increases the

number of those to whom it is an injury and an oppression to be denied the choice. To say that women must be excluded from active life because maternity disqualifies them for it, is in fact to say that every other career should be forbidden to them, in order that maternity may be their only resource (*The Enfranchisement of Women*).

Taylor Mill is essentially saying that the engagement in the animal activity of reproduction should not deny women from public life. To say that motherhood should disable women from working is to say that women are only fit to be mothers. *The Enfranchisement of Women* was published in 1851. In contemporary life it would seem as though we have moved far beyond this claim. Of course, we know that women are fit for more than being mothers. Yet, why do we continue to make it incredibly difficult for women to be anything other than mothers? In *On the Emancipation of Women*, Arendt touches on this very matter. Upon stating that, although women now enjoy the same political and social rights as men, Arendt proposes that women still have restrictions imposed upon them within marriage whereby they require the permission of their husbands to acquire property or earn a living. As I noted in Chapter One, Arendt believes that women's independence will rest on their economic independence from men. Nevertheless, Arendt does not think women working will automatically result in liberation for women. She writes:

The average situation of the professional woman is much more complicated. Not only must she accept, despite her legal equality, less remuneration for her work, but also she must continue to do socially and biologically grounded tasks that are incompatible with her new position. In addition to her profession, she must take care of her household and raise her children. Thus a woman's freedom to make her own living seems to imply either a kind of enslavement in her own home or the dissolution of her family (*OEW*, 67).

Arendt acknowledges that, even when there is, theoretically, a choice for women, neither choice is particularly attractive. Being nothing but a caring labourer is a type of

enslavement insofar as one will always be denied the opportunity for action, but choosing to occupy the public sphere means being judged as a wife and mother who is lesser than, or, perhaps, being denied the choice to be a wife and mother, at all.

## **Conclusion**

After closely examining the public and private realms according to Arendt, one finds that both are necessary to occupy to live a full human life, and that Arendt does not hold either in higher regard. Just as labor, work, and action are all necessary to live a fulfilling life, the public, private and social is another important tripartite grouping for Arendt. However, unlike labor, work and action, which are all vital for the human condition, the public and private are sacred spheres that are under threat of the invading social. Labor, work and action are the activities that are located amongst the various realms. Labor is conducted in the private realm. Work, while it can be conducted in solitude or in public, is always for the benefit of the public realm. Action must be conducted in public in order for it to be action, and it is always to the benefit of the public and the individual. The social is what happens when society is overly steeped in labor activities— and I would argue work activities — and when society is only concerned about sheer survival because they have lost the memory of what it is to share action with one another.

Labor and work are both imperative to the human existence. Work is more valued and recognized, because it is a public endeavour, whereas labor is conducted behind the curtain of the shadowy interior. Action functions as a sort of antidote to labor and work. While a person needs all three for a full human life, both labor and work can be harmful when not counteracted by the quintessential action, which can only be



exercised in the public realm. This action, by definition, is something that is acknowledged by others and is something for which the actor is recognized. Arendt posits that action is stifled because there has been a blurring of the public and private realms. They have, in a sense, collapsed and become a new sphere. The social is the result of the modern age and, according to Arendt's loose definition, it occurs when private/labor affairs are exercised at the state level meaning that the public sphere is overly steeped in the matters of the private sphere, when both spheres are supposed to have their own specific activities and be sacrosanct.

Pitkin's article helps to draw out the dangers of the social. She suggests that the social is what occurs when housekeeping goes large scale, when consumerism and domestication become primary. It encompasses conformism, complacency, convention, a gendered division of labour, commercial society, capitalism, and industrialization. The social is mass society, or what Pitkin calls the blob. When society is not controlled by any one person or entity, a blob takes over. There is no longer any personal responsibility. Personal responsibility leads us to a conversation about what it means to be a citizen and the role we all have to uphold and preserve the sanctity of the public realm. Gaffney speaks to the idea that liberal citizenship engenders feelings of loneliness, rendering people more susceptible to totalitarian domination. Arendt insists, to avoid this, human individuality and uniqueness must be fore fronted. All people deserve political belonging, but political belonging will only be granted to those who demonstrate their natality amongst the plurality.

Thuma's understanding of agency may be a way to secure this political belonging. Public space can be secured through agency, and Thuma suggests that enabling this agency requires four criteria. First, subject visibility, meaning the need for

the subject to be seen to affirm their identity. In this sense, understanding oneself is garnered through others' understanding of them. Thinking in solitude can be helpful for ruminating on action, but self-reflection will not lead to an understanding of oneself, only disclosure of oneself to others results in action. Thoughts can only be realized when spoken into words. As such, the second criterion is the capacity to communicate and interact, which is contingent on sharing cultural codes. This essentially means people are only equal insofar as they are provided with equal access to education and opportunities to make new beginnings. The third criterion is the capacity to make a beginning, which can only occur when one is set free from the chains of necessity, which is not always possible for women. Thuma maintains that so long as women are given the option to choose, they have freedom. They need a space for alternatives meaning, caring labour cannot be the only option with which women are presented, leaving no room for choice. Worldly attachment is the last criterion for action which requires a care for the world. Not everyone is interested in the world, but everyone has the same capacity for interest when empowered with the proper codes. The problem with each of these criteria is that while everyone has the same capacity for possessing the criteria, accessing agency is still hugely reliant on factors of identity. This is the problem one continues to run up against when examining the concepts laid out in *The Human Condition*. In the next chapter, I will confront the reality of identity as it pertains to applying Arendt's thought.

## Chapter Three

### Identity Politics in Arendt: the Intersection of Jewish Identity and Womanhood

My main argument in this thesis is that Arendt's concept of action is an emancipatory one, that can be put in service of furthering gender equality. To this point, the thesis has outlined how, at its core, action is an egalitarian concept. I have highlighted the gendered aspects of labor and work and have shown how one can interpret all three elements of the tripartite *vita activa* from a feminist perspective. I have showcased the drawbacks of examining Arendt from a phallogocentric or gynocentric lens and underscored the fact that examining Arendt's thought from a binary angle is not productive as action centers around the universality and equality of the human condition. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated how, in the social realm where there has been a loss of action, we are more susceptible to loneliness and, subsequently, to totalitarianism. It is quintessential to understand the link between a gendered division of labour and a stifling of individuals' unrealized identity, which correlates with a vulnerability to totalitarianism that exists in the social sphere. The way to reclaim action is to preserve the sanctity of the public sphere and insert all people into this sphere so that they can disclose their action to one another. However, this cannot be done without first addressing the reality of identity politics. The central question posed and answered in this chapter will be: what bearing does identity have on how we come to the public sphere and perform action?

Arendt's thought is no doubt shaped by the fact she is a German-Jewish woman who lived through World War II and the Holocaust. At different times throughout her life, she was confronted with her Jewishness and her womanhood. To help understand

this, I closely examine Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen, a German-Jewish woman who hosted one of the most prominent salons in Berlin during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Varnhagen wanted all her life to denounce her Jewishness but much of her misfortune and position in life had a great deal to do with her womanhood, as well. Nevertheless, she was able to run a salon in Berlin which hosted many prominent artists, poets, and intellectuals.

Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen attempts to document Varnhagen's thoughts in a way that she herself would have documented them. It is based on unprinted letters and diaries but, of course, it is impossible for Arendt to have known Varnhagen's innermost thoughts. As such, when we read Varnhagen's testimony of what it is to be a German-Jewish woman, we are in some ways reading Arendt's rumination on these aspects of her own identity. Arendt was likely attempting to parse through her own ideas about what it means to be Jewish while writing this biography of Varnhagen, as well as bring to light an important Jewish figure during a time when anti-Semitism was becoming commonplace in her home country. Arendt wrote the biography 100 years after Varnhagen's death and had an "awareness of the doom of German Judaism" that Varnhagen did not have (Benhabib, 8). This text is incredibly rich and is necessary to read to get a more introspective view of Arendt's thoughts on Jewishness and womanhood, and what it meant for her own lived experience.

In her book "The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt," Seyla Benhabib calls the salon "a female public sphere" (Benhabib, 14). Hosting a salon is most certainly a display of action. It is a space where women have been able to exercise action, so it must be said that Varnhagen was able to occupy a semi-public sphere in the salon. Benhabib helps decipher why it is necessary to examine *Rahel Varnhagen*. When asking the

woman question, she says: “We begin by searching in the footnotes, in the marginalia, in the less recognized works of a thinker for those “traces” (*Spurren*) that are left behind by women’s presence and are more often than not by their absence” (Benhabib, 4).

Benhabib is essentially saying that when one wishes to pose the woman question in Arendt’s work, one ought to begin with a text that “certainly does not occupy a central place in any systematic interpretation of her political philosophy, namely, *Rahel Varnhagen*” (Benhabib, 5). Examining this text proves fruitful not only because it provides insight into Arendt’s position on identity, but also because it reveals why Arendt, years later, may have coined the concept of *vita activa* and, in particular, action. It is no surprise that a woman who may have felt confined to a prescribed set of qualities would coin a theory entirely devoted to individuality amongst plurality, namely action.

It is necessary to understand that, sometimes, various factors of one’s identity are in competition with one another or, at the very least, perceived as competition. This seems to be the case with Arendt’s Jewishness and womanhood. Benhabib writes:

“Hannah Arendt’s self-consciousness of herself as a Jew, and her belief that in the twentieth century to be Jewish had become “political” and unavoidable fact, stand in sharp contrast to her almost total silence on the women’s question” (Benhabib, 1).

Marion Kaplan is helpful on this matter as she explores the concepts of feminism and anti-Semitism in Germany during the years 1904-1938. Jewish women did not necessarily see women’s liberation as their fight because anti-Semitism was a looming issue they constantly had to battle, and an issue with which gentile women did not have to concern themselves. That said, as with the intersection of all identities, Jewish women experience anti-Semitism in a way that gentile women do not, but also face misogyny, which Jewish men do not, and gentile women do. This dimension of intersectionality

reminds us how solidarity can cut across all lines of identity. While it is important to remember how Jewish women may face sexism differently than non-Jewish women, they can share the lived experience of sexism. By sharing the experience of sexism, we can come to understand it better, with the hope of destabilizing it completely. Likewise, non-Jewish women can attempt to use their power to abolish anti-Semitism.

I am interested in demonstrating how Arendt fights back against the notion that she must think a certain way based solely on the fact she is a woman or a Jew but, at the same time, does not believe that women's issues should be divorced from other emancipatory concerns. This, in turn, shows that she recognized the reality of intersectionality before it even had a name. Identity politics would essentially hold that because Arendt was a woman philosopher, she had a responsibility to speak on her experience as a woman. It would also say that she was failing her community of fellow women by not attaching herself to the shared hardships of women. However, Arendt would not limit or confine herself to a mere set of biological and social attributes. The idea that a woman would have to be loyal to feminism – insofar as they must write on the topic – is inconsistent with feminism. It reduces women to nothing more than their essentialist sex. In this section, I take up the idea that demanding that Arendt be a feminist in the traditional sense is unreasonable. Arendt was committed to theorizing about totalitarianism because of the events of her life. In theorizing how to combat totalitarianism, through action, she opposes sexism. Fascism encompasses incredibly restrictive roles for women and the family. By combatting totalitarianism, Arendt creates an emancipatory concept for all people living under restrictive regimes, including the structure of patriarchy.

With the goal of interrogating identity politics, but also understanding the role it plays in Arendt's work, it is necessary to define identity politics. Identity politics "express the principle that identity – be it individual or collective – should be central to both the vision and practice of radical politics... Identity politics also express the belief that identity itself – its elaboration, expression, or affirmation – is and should be a fundamental focus of political work" (Kauffman in Ryan, 23). Of course, there is a danger in assuming anyone would think or hold certain beliefs based solely on the markers of their identity, be it immutable characteristics like gender, race or sexuality, or characteristics that are chosen but still personal, and sometimes linked to ethnicity, like religion. It should not be the case that all women have common goals based solely on their womanhood. Identity politics was in some ways a response to formerly exclusionary ideas about womanhood. Second-wave feminism held that the sisterhood model of solidarity was perhaps the best way to achieve liberation. While this model made a great many strides, it was not successful in ending sexism. In her article "Solidarity after identity politics: the power of feminist theory," Amy Allen argues that Arendt provides a model of solidarity that in fact withstands the new landscape of identity politics. Arendt is less so concerned with individual markers of identity and more so concerned with the power that undergirds all oppression. Arendt theorizes a concept of solidarity that accounts for both equality and difference, that feminists can use moving forward.

Action holds that one has a unique outlook to share, regardless of one's identity. The concepts of natality and plurality are central dimensions of action. Natality states that with each person something new is brought into the world, and plurality states that, although we are all different, we all live in this world together (*HC*, 8). Action refers to

the fact 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). All people possess the same capacity to act. Action is a universal concept no less applicable to any one person over another. If action is the essence of the human condition and all people possess action equally, then women are equally capable as men in whatever activity they take up and disclose to the world. As such, Arendt provides a vehicle for women’s liberation through action, and to provide this avenue for women’s liberation is a feminist act.

### **Arendt’s Ruminations on Jewishness and Womanhood: The Case of Rahel Varnhagen**

Arendt began writing the biography of Rahel Varnhagen in Germany in the 1930s as her *Habilitationsschrift*, which is the work one must complete to be granted permission to teach at German universities. However, Arendt had to flee Germany before it was completed but was able to bring the manuscript with her to France and completed it in 1938. When she was forced to flee to the United States, she could not bring the manuscript with her, and the work was seemingly lost. Thankfully, Arendt had given a copy to her friend Gershom Scholem. As such, she was able to finally publish the work in 1957, just one year before *The Human Condition* was published (Benhabib, 5). The original title was *Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Juedin aus der Romantik* which translates to *The Life History of a German Jewess From the Romantic Period*. It is typically shortened to *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* or *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*.

The subject matter of the work represents a significant shift in Arendt’s writing. At the time that she began writing this work, she had just finished writing her



dissertation on love in the thought of Saint Augustine. She relied on the approaches of her teachers Heidegger and Jaspers to formulate an interpretation of love in the work of Augustine, a Christian bishop and theologian who lived between the years 354 and 430. In the work, she conceptualizes three concepts of love: love as desire, love between man and creator, and love of one's neighbour (*LSA*). Essentially, erotic love, divine love, and love as friendship. While it is likely that something can be learned from Augustine's conceptions of love, there is something somewhat assimilationist about this topic. As Pitkin puts it: "What's a nice Jewish girl doing with a topic like that" (Pitkin in Honig, 69). This is not to say a Jewish woman cannot have a philosophical interest in this topic, it is simply to say that just as male-stream thought was the dominant stream in German universities at this time, so too was Christian theology. Arendt said in her own words that when the fate of the Jewish people was under threat, she felt compelled to shift the focus of her research and explore themes of assimilation, the Jewish diaspora, and the concept of Jew as pariah. With this shift, the biography of Rahel Varnhagen was born.

Rahel Varnhagen (born Levin) was born in Berlin in 1771 to a wealthy family. Her father was a jeweler. Upon her father's death, her brothers took over the business and lost a great deal of the family fortune. They gave their mother a lifetime allowance and attempted to marry the two sisters off as quickly as possible. They were successful in marrying off Rahel's younger sister, but they were not successful in marrying off Rahel (*RV*, 5). Arendt spends some time documenting the fact that Rahel was not beautiful: "Beauty in a woman can mean power, and Jewish girls were frequently not married for their dowries alone. With Rahel, however, nature went to no great trouble" (*RV*, 6). Rahel wrote in her own words:

“I have no grace, not even the grace to see what the cause of that is; in addition to not being pretty, I also have no inner grace... I am unprepossessing rather than ugly... Some people have not a single-good looking feature, not a single praiseworthy proportion, and yet they make a pleasing impression... With me it is just the opposite” (*RV*, 6).

One finds that the tone of many of Varnhagen’s letters and diary entries are rather self-hating. Self-hatred is a looming theme throughout the biography. The biography is also, at times, somewhat challenging to read. By many accounts, it is one of the more difficult works of Arendt to read, not because the philosophical concepts present in the work are particularly complex or abound, but because Arendt constantly interjects her own thoughts, with or between quotes from Varnhagen’s correspondence. At times, it is difficult to decipher who is speaking and whose thoughts belong to whom.

Because Varnhagen was unmarried, and the generosity of her family eventually ran out, she was forced to somehow make a living. She ran a salon out of the attic of her apartment when she was in her twenties (Bradshaw, 100). Many prominent intellectuals flocked to her salon. It is documented that Varnhagen knew Goethe personally (Bradshaw, 100). Arendt’s biography does not so much detail the events of the salon, although being a salonnière was certainly Varnhagen’s claim to fame. Varnhagen was successful in rising to prominence in high society, even if she was never able to fully denounce her Jewishness. The biography begins with a quote from Varnhagen on her deathbed and then works its way backwards: “The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life – having been born a Jewess – this I should on no account now wish to have missed” (*RV*, 3). Arendt wishes to show that while Varnhagen faced shame regarding her Jewishness and sought most of her life to dispose of it, by the end of her life, she embraced it. This transformation marks what Arendt calls the transformation from *parvenu* to *pariah* – someone who

wishes to climb high society and be accepted, to someone who fully accepts their otherness. While it appears that Varnhagen only reached this conclusion at the end of her life, Arendt wants to signal to the reader that acknowledging one's otherness is the correct way to live. In a sense, 'other' is another definition for action. According to action, one is supposed to celebrate one's singularity and share it with others in the public sphere. While it is important to note that Arendt began writing *Rahel Varnhagen* long before she wrote *The Human Condition*, her thinking is consistent. Had Varnhagen been comfortable living as pariah, rather than trying all her life to assimilate, she may have been happy. If all people reject assimilation and live as pariahs, they may save themselves from becoming massed. The cautionary tale laid out in *Rahel Varnhagen* is compatible with Arendt's message in *The Human Condition*. To act as parvenu and hide the traits that make someone an individual is to give up action and comply with the conventional social. When one accepts their pariah status and constantly asserts their action, they are safeguarding themselves and their community from totalitarianism. In other words, the assimilationists cannot win when everyone asserts their action.

The biography, as noted, is incredibly introspective and somewhat melancholy. It details her love affairs and her quest for a husband. Arendt spends so much time focusing on Varnhagen's disdain for her Jewishness, when it is apparent that a good majority of Varnhagen's misfortune actually has to do with her womanhood. Yes, her marriageability is impacted by the fact she is Jewish. But marriageability would not be the sole determinant of her livelihood if it were not for the fact of her womanhood. Varnhagen would not be recording her lack of beauty and grace if she were not a woman. After several attempts, Rahel finally marries Karl August Varnhagen von Ense

when she is 43 years old.<sup>13</sup> He was the one to publish her letters after her death. They shared a good relationship for twenty years, before Rahel's death in 1833 at age 63.

Even though, according to her own and Arendt's account, anti-Semitism is Varnhagen's biggest challenge, Arendt dedicates the preface of the biography to the issue of Varnhagen's womanhood. Arendt notes that the biography was written "with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism (although, naturally, without any premonition of how far the physical annihilation of the Jewish people in Europe would be carried)" (*RV*, xxiii). As such, one can understand why Arendt was chronicling Jewish history, to bring to light not only an important Jewish figure but also the presence of anti-Semitism even in Varnhagen's time. Arendt grapples with the idea that the Jewish people are in exile everywhere they go because they have no homeland. They live in a condition of statelessness and are, as such, confronted with being unwanted everywhere. However, Arendt depicts Rahel in such a way that her assimilation can be viewed as a success, not because her Jewishness was something that needed to be disposed of but because, in the process of attempting to assimilate, Rahel formed something that added to the culture of Berlin. Her Jewishness, her womanhood, and her mere existence enriched the lives of those around her. Similarly, hosting a salon was a product of her womanhood, and something that ought to be celebrated. Arendt writes:

The modern reader will scarcely fail to observe that Rahel was neither beautiful nor attractive; that all men with whom she had any kind of love relationship were younger than herself; that she possessed no talents with which to employ her extraordinary intelligence and passionate originality; and finally, that she was a typically "romantic" personality, and that the Woman problem, that is the discrepancy between what men expected of women "in general" and what women could give or wanted in their turn, was already established by the

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<sup>13</sup> By this time, Rahel had converted to Christianity and had already changed her surname once before, to Robert, not because she was married, but in the name of assimilation.

conditions of the era and represented a gap that virtually could not be closed (*RV*, xxiv).

Arendt acknowledges that during Rahel's life, women were more restricted, limited and oppressed. Arendt signals the fact that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were subjected to the "established conditions of the era," meaning, the socially constructed confinement of women. While Arendt speaks of these established conditions very matter of factly, not as if they are better or worse than the conditions of the twentieth century, she acknowledges their existence, and how they impacted Varnhagen's life. My interest in this biography lies in the way that Varnhagen 'rose above' both her Jewishness and her womanhood. Neither of these factors stopped Varnhagen from exercising action. While they no doubt made her life more difficult than someone in a position of privilege, Varnhagen was able to break through these barriers. It was the fact that Varnhagen was 'other' that she was able to perform action. I will subsequently explore salons as a mode of public sphere and action.

### **The 'Female Public Sphere'**

As I have noted, there is an unresolved issue with calling action emancipatory and useful for feminism. It is true that, in theory, action is a universal concept that all human beings have the capacity to exercise and that, if we all performed action, equality would become widespread. However, it is still a lofty and idealist view to say all people can express action equally. The very structures that action would seek to combat, such as sexism, stand in the way of all people being able to exercise it. Because women have traditionally been excluded from the public sphere, they cannot wholly perform action as it takes place in the public sphere. But the public sphere is all-encompassing and being

an actor in society is about more than just existing in public. Being an actor in society typically means being a citizen with suffrage, having paid employment and owning property. As such, women have historically been denied true access to the public sphere because they have been excluded from all these dimensions of public life. However, given these circumstances, women from all walks of life and from all periods throughout history have sought to push back against the conditions of their lives. During early modernity in Europe amongst high society, this pushback took the form of the salon.

Salons had a subversive quality because they took place inside the home, in what would typically be considered the private/domestic sphere. But the very nature of the salon, and the conversations that took place within them, were of public interest. A salon gathers eminent people, such as writers, artists, and thinkers, at the invitation of a woman, typically in high society. Gatherings resembling salons date back to classical Greece and twelfth-century French courts but rose to prominence and took shape during the Renaissance in Italy (Benhabib, 16). Being a salonnière contains elements of being a domestician and homemaker, as the salon takes place inside the home. However, inviting people into one's home in the name of intellectual conversation signals worldliness and intellectual curiosity. To be surrounded by such dialogue not only expands one's worldview but to invite these public figures into one's home creates a public sphere itself. Having these conversations is the very expression of action for which Arendt advocates.

The salons in Berlin of Rahel Varnhagen's time contained another dimension. While the women hosting these salons were exceptional women no doubt interested in literature, politics, and art, it was not simply the case that they hosted these events because they enjoyed their subject matter. Hosting these salons had the promise of

securing their emancipation and freedom from their fate as Jewish women. These women included but were not limited to; Dorothea (Mendelsohn) Veit Schlegel, Henriette Herz, Rebecca Friedlander, and Amalie Beer (Benhabib, 15). However, this period, 1780-1806, is referred to in German intellectual history as *die Rahelzeit*, which means the Rahel period. This was significant because it was occurring at a time when “the majority of central and eastern European Jews were still poor peddlers and traders, living in small villages, speaking Yiddish and following the traditional way of life” (Deborah Hertz, 3). Hertz writes that “Surely here, in the drawing rooms of Berlin’s rich and sophisticated Jewish women, was to be found the realization of a dream of emancipation that was just being proposed by avant-garde intellectuals” (Hertz, 3). Generally, the women hosting these salons were wealthy. They were the daughters and wives of well-to-do Jewish merchants and intellectuals who were often absent, away working in the world of commerce (Benhabib, 15). Benhabib writes in her chapter “The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Biography of Rahel Varnhagen” that these women accomplished three primary feats by hosting salons. First, they emancipated themselves from their traditional patriarchal families. They did so by refusing to marry their future Jewish husbands to be. Sometimes, as in the case of Rahel, they would convert to Christianity. In this sense, their emancipation as women was closely tied to their rejection of Judaism. While this was an expression of their agency as women, it was typically motivated by the desire to assimilate, which could be viewed as swapping one form of oppression for another. Second, they helped create high culture. The Enlightenment was coming to an end, and they helped form what would become German Romanticism. They created a social space for Berlin’s intelligentsia at a time when the city lacked a university. And third, their salons acted as meeting places where

people could forge bonds across class, religion, and even gender (Benhabib, 16). The mandate of the salons was to gather and share the common experience of humanity.

Both French and German salons centred around the Enlightenment idea of *l'homme* or *der Mensch*, meaning, the human being (technically, both these words translate to 'man,' but they are meant to account for 'people'). The idea is that, regardless of our social, cultural or religious attachments, we are all human (Benhabib, 17). Benhabib writes: "There is no greater proof of our common humanity than the fact that we can communicate with and understand each other. The salons are social gatherings in which "the joy of conversation," the joy of communication and understanding as well as misunderstandings and lack of communication, is discovered" (Benhabib, 17). Sharing these aspects of human life with one another and having conversations about what it means to be human, is what helps connect participants to each other and their common humanity. The salon was a mode of high society, aristocracy, and nobility that was, no doubt, structured by class.

While, at its core, people relating to one another on the basis of shared humanity should transcend class, it can also be elitist. To come together in the living room of an aristocratic woman and converse with members of the upper echelon typically requires that you are empowered with an education and privilege. The practice of the salon is well-intentioned, but it is bourgeois. It is something that typically only members of high society had access to. However, even the element of class in the context of the salon is highly gendered. The Jewish hostesses of these salons in Berlin, while they were of means, could not break into high society and be accepted as parvenu unless they rid themselves of their Jewishness. They were willing to give up their religion and sever ties with their families, and their ancestors if it meant securing themselves better lives. They



denounced their Jewishness to break into high society. They did so because it was the only way of securing economic security as women. The many dimensions of their identity were inextricably linked.

What marks the difference between the salon and the traditional public sphere is that it allows for moments of intimacy and privacy. “The joy of speech culminates in friendship, in that meeting of the hearts” (Benhabib, 17). A tenet of the German salon was the search for a *Seelenfreund*, a friend of one’s soul. This type of friend understands one perhaps better than oneself (Benhabib, 17). Yet, if this type of friend can know a person better than anyone else, there is a sense that the soul is an element of the self that is not visible to all in public. “The public reveals and conceals at the same time; it is only in the withdrawal from the public into the sheltered space of a two-or-three-person relationship that one can move inward, toward who one really is” (Benhabib, 18). The salon allows for this type of closeness to form. While Arendt argues that disclosing oneself to others in the public sphere is how one’s identity is affirmed, action can also be expressed to one or few other people. Some of the truest action may be disclosed to those with whom one has close bonds and shared intimacy. The beauty of the salon is that it blurs the lines of public and private. The salon, in this sense, is fluid, as matters of public concern are discussed, but it also allows for some matters to remain private:

Unlike an assembly hall, a town square, a conference room, or even simply the family dinner table, the salon, with its large, luxurious, and rambling space, allows for moments of intimacy; in a salon, people are with each other but must not always be next to each other. Salons are amorphous structures with no established rules of entry and exit for those who have formed intimacy; in fact, it may be a sign of good manners to foster and to allow the formation of intimacy among members of the salon. What is important here is the fluidity of the lines between gathering as one and the gatherings as many units of intimacy, and how the salons can be both public and private, both shared and intimate (Benhabib, 18).

Arendt may condemn private matters going public, but she would not take issue with public concerns being a topic of conversation in private, at least not in the context of the salon. Arendt hosted salon-like dinner parties herself and felt these to be the ideal setting for intimate conversations about worldly concerns (Wilkinson). This is how, she says, people stay engaged and practice what she refers to as politics. It is what will protect people from political despotism. Nevertheless, in the salon, the sanctity of the private can still be preserved.

Although Arendt chose to write the biography of Rahel Varnhagen and was, seemingly, an admirer, it is still valid to question whether Arendt approved of the salon as a form of public sphere. Benhabib writes “Almost in every respect, the salons, as modes of the public sphere, contradict the *agonal* model of the public sphere of the polis that predominates in *The Human Condition*” (Benhabib, 19). It is overwhelmingly apparent when reading *The Human Condition* that Arendt is a supporter of the Ancient Greek model of politics. Many feminist critics of Arendt fault her for this as the Ancient Greek polis entirely excluded women. Women were not citizens in Ancient Greece and Arendt never states that this is a problem. One might gather that she merely wishes to apply aspects of Ancient Greece to modern-day society so, in this arrangement, women would be citizens. Yet, we can never know for certain, as she remains silent on the issue. “Whereas the Greek polis and the public sphere characteristic of it exclude women (and other members of the household like children and servants generally), the salons are spaces dominated by female presence” (Benhabib, 19). Another way in which the polis and the salon are different is the way in which the polis suppressed eros, and the salon fosters and sometimes cultivates the erotic. The polis is serious, and the salon is more playful. But they share commonalities in that they both rely on the assumption of

equality among their participants. While in the polis everyone was equal on the basis of citizenship, in the salon everyone is equal on the basis of their humanity. Arguably, the salon is a place where action can be more at the forefront, as it acknowledges that everyone has something unique to share and should share it with others. “Plurality is the condition of action because 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). We are the same insofar as we are all human, but that is where the similarities end. The salon allows us to share this common experience of humanity but also share poetry, literature and art which are deeply personal and cannot be replicated the same way twice. In some ways, the salon may be the truest manifestation of action. The salon is the women-friendly symposium.

Arendt may favour the Ancient Greek model of politics and she may believe that some topics ought to be off-limits in the public sphere. Famously, she thought that sexual politics had no place in the political sphere, perhaps because she thought these matters to be private and, therefore, to be kept within the four walls of the private realm (Kaplan in Honig, 105). As second-wave feminists pressed, the “personal is political” (Hanisch in Crow, 113). Arendt would have thought this to be inappropriate. In her view, politics are supposed to be serious, civil, and dignified. This notion, no doubt, is patriarchal. It is also problematic because, if issues such as reproductive rights or sexual assault and harassment are kept private, they will never be addressed. To not view these issues as civil and serious is to dismiss them as unimportant. Perhaps she felt shame about these issues, as many women who have been shaped by sexism often feel. What is encouraging, however, is that Arendt chose to shift her focus from something that was male-stream, such as love in the thought of Saint Augustine, to a subject matter that was

not only Jewish-centric but also women-centric. Benhabib writes: “If we proceed to decenter Arendt’s political thought, if we read her work from the margins toward the center, then we can displace her fascination with the polis to make room for her more modernist and women-friendly reflections on the salon” (Benhabib, 20). Arendt, in a sense, is telling us that creating a space that allows for more diversity of thought, is better. Not only is this approach more democratic but there was a craving for it. Deborah Hertz writes:

It was odd that private drawing rooms should have been public places, odd that in an age when women were excluded from educational and civic institutions, even wives of rich and powerful men should lead intellectual discussions amongst the most learned men of their cities. It was odd that men and women should have important intellectual exchanges during centuries when the two sexes generally had little to say to each other and few public places in which to say it” (Hertz, 18).

Even though women were traditionally excluded from public life and public institutions, salons are an example of women pushing back against the socially constructed constraints of their time, much to the delight of themselves and of those who frequented the salons, namely men. Men and women were able to have intellectual conversations as equals, and it was enjoyable. It is almost as if this is what humans were naturally born to do – as if they were born as natural equals - and it is the artificial institutions with which they are surrounded that form unnatural inequalities among men and women.

### **Who is a Citizen?**

Arendt does not make clear in *The Human Condition* who is her audience when she is espousing her universal concepts that presumably apply to all human beings. The reason for this is that she uses the term ‘man’ to refer to all people. Arendt is by no means the only writer or philosopher of her time at fault for this practice. In fact,

essentially all the thinkers who predate her and, unfortunately, many of those who follow her, fall into this practice. However, I would like to dissect her use of the term 'man' as I propose that, by using this word, she is making a critique. Not a critique of gendered terms but, rather, a critique of the philosophical tradition. When Arendt uses the term 'man,' she is subtly deriding the notion that everyone is the same, as if man could somehow account for all people. The problem with using the term 'man' to account for all people, aside from the suggestion that anything apart from man or the male sex is something less than human, is that there is no one man. Let us say for argument's sake that the male gender is all that makes up human beings. Human males are not all the same insofar as philosophical principles cannot be applied to all men in the same way. Just as biology plays a role in the makeup of each individual brain, lived experience plays a role in human behaviour. In addition to the term 'man' being factually wrong when referring to a woman, it does not account for individual lived experiences. This is why, Arendt thought, there was a need for a concept such as action to account for the individual aspects of every person.

Philosophy and political philosophy have historically dealt with 'man' as their subject. The abstract definition of 'man' assumes a common nature among all human beings, regardless of the uniqueness which characterizes each one (Guaraldo, 32). Olivia Guaraldo, author of *Storylines: Politics, History and Narrative from an Arendtian Perspective*, writes:

...Political philosophy, beginning with Plato's *Republic* has attempted to 'work' with this abstraction in constructing political models. By creating a subject with few but universal features and by tailoring it to political modes of interaction, political philosophy has banned human freedom from the earth. According to Arendt, the abstraction of 'Man' in fact implies a total misunderstanding of human plurality, that is, the fact that each human being is distinct from others (Guaraldo, 32).

While it is certainly true that Arendt is creating her own universal concepts when discussing *vita activa*, she accounts for the part of ‘man’ or of human beings that are distinct. Arendt writes:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or ever will be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough (*HC*, 175-176).

Arendt’s thought process brings new meaning to ‘equal but different.’ All people are equal insofar as we are all human beings, but we are not all the same insofar as we all have different needs, desires, and abilities. We all have the same ability to act, but what form this action takes will not look the same in two different people. Through plurality, Arendt coins the concept that what makes us different is, in fact, what makes us equal. This dilemma had seldom been addressed in philosophy.

It becomes evident that Arendt has a keen awareness of how all people are different. Therefore, when she speaks of an abstract ‘man’ or ‘citizen’ she has this awareness. Arendt is having the conversation that is a precursor to our modern-day conception of identity politics, without naming it as such. In fact, she is formulating these thoughts at a very similar time that second-wave feminists were formulating the concept of intersectionality. But while the concept of action is at the forefront of all Arendt’s thought, she would be wary of the evolution of identity politics. By the late 1980s, feminist theorists were beginning to have a conversation about identity politics, problematizing the idea of the abstract citizen, and suggesting that a person does not come to the political sphere as an abstract citizen but, rather, as a person with individual

lived experience that is gendered, racialized, defined by class, etc. (Allen, 99). It becomes clear that what is meant by an abstract citizen and how this citizen is treated in political philosophy, is a white male. When one enters the political sphere, they are either coming to it as the abstract citizen or as a gendered and racialized person and all the experience that comes with those attachments. Naturally, this is a problem that needed to be addressed. The abstract citizen was the only form of citizen for centuries and, therefore, a massive collective effort is essential to help deconstruct this notion. However, a problem can arise when the only way that one approaches politics is as a member of a group, forgetting how, at our core, we are equal, and should be pursuing a common good. It is problematic to overly attach oneself to a group, thus forgetting the universality of the human condition.

There is a debate present in Arendt's thought, and present in current-day politics, whereby people are unsure of how much emphasis to place on identity. Arendt is cautious of placing too much focus on identity because once groups become categorized together by markers of identity, it is easier to single them out. One ends up with groups motivated by common interests, rather than the political arena being a place to work toward a common good for all groups and all people. Worse yet, groups marked by identity can begin to form enemies with one another. This happens every day in politics, but the most extreme example would be when it happens during war. Arendt witnessed first-hand what occurred when Jews were singled out due to their ethnoreligious identity, which ultimately led to the Holocaust. She is reacting to her experience, as well as the global experience of the Holocaust and the danger of singling out groups based on identity. As such, there is a tension present in Arendt's thought. She does not wish for individuals to be placed in a mass group. Rather, she offers the concept of action, which

asserts individuality. Arendt's thought forces us to recognize that we must navigate the precarious situation of not losing our identity, but not organizing a society around it.

### **Anti-Semitism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: An Issue of Identity over Solidarity**

To understand how issues of identity politics can be detrimental to achieving both solidarity and action, it is helpful to examine the case of two different women's groups that were active in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. Identity was a highly relevant concept in Germany during both World War I and World War II.

Women in Germany at this time were experiencing at a rapid rate shifting attitudes toward their status. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an established base for women's issues in Germany. Jewish women were siloed into a different group, separate from other German women. Marion Kaplan refers to the experience of Jewish women in the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany as a double burden of sexism and racism, not so dissimilar from what Frances M. Beal refers to as double jeopardy in her article "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" about the double oppression faced by African American women in 1969. In her essay "Sisterhood Under Siege: Feminism and Anti-Semitism in Germany, 1904-1938," Kaplan examines two groups that existed during this time: the League of Jewish Women (hereafter referred to as the JFB) and the Federation of German Women's Association (hereafter referred to as the BDF). She details how the JFB struggled to promote feminist goals within the Jewish community as well as be accepted by the German women's movement. These two groups shared "gender-specific experiences across ethnic/religious lines yet suffered divisions created by these same identities" (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 174). While the two groups had a great many common goals and could be stronger in numbers if together, anti-



Semitism ultimately made it so that Jewish women were fighting for sheer survival as the Nazis began to implement anti-Semitic policies and move towards their goal of the Final Solution. The BDF was unable to come to their aid, either because it was dangerous or because members of the BDF held anti-Semitic ideals themselves. What resulted when the Nazis seized power is that neither Jewish feminism nor feminism of any kind could exist in Germany.

What makes the case of German women and Jewish women in the first half of the twentieth century so difficult is that, in addition to facing existing sexism and anti-Semitism, their society was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic and misogynistic, so women and Jews in Germany at this time were both experiencing increased marginalization, restrictions and hatred. Kaplan writes:

German-Jewish women suffered a dual stigmatization of gender and “race” in a society that became increasingly misogynist and anti-Semitic. In times of relative social peace and harmony, Jewish women fought the sexism of their own German-Jewish community. Often, they combined with their German sisters in feminist solidarity, focusing on common concerns. But as radical, racist anti-Semitism grew, Jewish women were forcibly divided from other feminists. They fought for Jewish survival, as feminist loyalties dissolved in the face of increasingly hideous anti-Semitic persecutions (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 175).

Kaplan calls the situation faced by German-Jewish women double jeopardy as a result of their ethnic/religious heritage, which the Nazis referred to as race, and their sex (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 175). Jewish men were granted suffrage before Jewish women, and even once women in Germany had the right to vote in 1918, Jewish women still could not vote in their own elections for Jewish communal office (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 175). So Jewish women did face specific sexism within the Jewish community. Even though feminism is, at times, at odds with organized religion, Jewish women felt mobilized to organize a women’s movement, to improve their overall status,

while maintaining positive attachments to faith. Members of the JFB were largely middle-class housewives, which made it so that they had neither professional careers nor working-class allegiances that would have granted them entry into professional women's organizations or working-class women's associations (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 176). As such, the JFB provided an opportunity for housewives to associate with other women who shared their religious and class identities.

Faith was a large part of the JFB. "Jewish feminists acknowledged the positive attachments of faith, culture, and destiny that they shared with Jewish men" (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 177). What made the JFB different from mainstream German feminists is that they were not willing to focus on secular feminism if it meant foregoing their Jewish roots. They desired to be accepted while still preserving their distinctiveness. Surely, this does not seem like an extreme demand. "The loss of Jewish identity was too high a price to pay for social acceptance" (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 177). For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that what these women were asking for was to be able to express their action. To be accepted in the public sphere as citizens, and to display their distinctiveness, their uniqueness, and their identity as Jews. Jewish people had hoped their emancipation would be an opportunity for the entry of "Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity," not just an opportunity to imitate gentile society (*JP*, 100).

Just as Jewish women were able to identify with Jewish men because they shared the positive bond of faith, they shared negative bonds, as well. Jewish men and women, alike, were subject to anti-Semitism and, as such, it was not so much a conscious choice to organize their women's movement along religious lines but was more so caused by a lack of social integration with the rest of German society (Bridenthal, Grossman,

Kaplan, 176). That said, Jewish feminists were as unwilling to sacrifice women's issues for Jewish solidarity as they were to neglect their Jewishness for feminist solidarity (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 177). The fact of their ethnic-religion was not going to stand in the way of demanding equal rights as women in Germany, and their being women was not going to stand in the way of advancing women's rights within their own Jewish communities.

The JFB would often invite Christian women to their events, as they viewed them as sisters and allies, stating that "the fight against anti-Semitism must originate with Christian women," just as we often say the fight against sexism must begin with men (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 186). It is the dominant group with the most privilege that has the power to shift the attitudes of those around them. Jewish women compared the plight of the Jews to the plight of women. They acknowledged that each group wished to fit in with society, while still retaining their unique qualities. "Recognizing that race and gender discrimination were mutually reinforcing and equally oppressive, the JFB argued that German and Jewish women should fight anti-Semitism because Jews and feminists shared the same struggle for emancipation" (Bridenthal, Grossman, Kaplan, 186). As the political conditions in Germany began to worsen, it became clear that Jewish interests and the interests of women were quite aligned. Both groups were becoming increasingly oppressed. But the lives of Jewish women were under immediate threat as they were experiencing extreme discrimination and hatred. Threatened annihilation erases choice so that it is not a conscious choice to mobilize around the cause but, rather, necessary to mobilize for mere survival.

In November 1938, on the night of *Kristallnacht*, the JFB was ordered to dissolve. Many of its members had opportunities to emigrate but chose instead to work

for their cause until the very end. Most of their leaders became victims of the Final Solution. The story of the JFB highlights the ways in which ethnicity, race and religion intersect with gender to shape the lived experience of women. It was incredibly important to the JFB to preserve their distinctiveness and their Jewish identity or, in other words, to perform their action. But they also worked alongside and shared many common concerns with the BDF. No doubt, the BDF was thinking of their own survival when they began to distance themselves from the JFB. They, too, would have become victims of the Nazis had they positioned themselves as supporters of the JFB. But the JFB had been right to appeal to their fellow German feminists when they said the fight against anti-Semitism had to start with Christian and gentile women. By not coming to the aid of the Jewish women in crisis, the BDF took part in the very discrimination and prejudice they claimed to oppose. With this position, they also lost what had initially defined them. They were not able to express feminism in any way by the end. They could not express their action.

The case of the JFB and the BDF is only one example of how different feminist movements can be exclusionary. German feminism did not teach Jewish women to embrace their Judaism. It told Jewish women to pick one identity or the other. Both groups had a great deal to learn from one another. Both were seeking emancipation, to have their identity affirmed and to have their contributions recognized. Action is about asserting distinctiveness, but also about recognizing the commonality of humanity.

Arendt may have been wary about the women's movement because she knew issues of identity could hinder solidarity. If this had been Arendt's exposure to feminism in Germany, she would have witnessed the tensions in the women's movement. Arendt would not have wanted women to forego their Jewish ties for feminism and would have

thought this to be a drawback of feminism. It is also the case that mainstream feminism in Germany became somewhat synonymous with anti-Semitism. It is often the case that when feminism and anti-racism unfold, the two are pitted against one another. This is the last thing that either group should want, as each cause can be helpful to one another.

The only distinguishing element that separated the JFB and the BDF was ethnic-religion and yet, they could not collaborate. When collaboration comes at the price of having to abandon identity, there can be no collaboration. Per Arendt's definition, the women's movement could also be considered a mass movement. German feminism was the dominant stream of feminism and it attempted to assimilate other women and lump them into a mass. Because placing into a mass of any kind, even if it is well-intentioned, is reminiscent of the social and stifles action, Arendt would not be fully supportive. If it is not a climate which fosters the individual action of all its participants, then it is possibly damaging. Therefore, this is a good rule for considering what is inclusionary. If identity can be appropriately acknowledged, then action can be performed. Only then can action be put towards a positive cause, by acknowledging each individual contribution, towards a common good. In this sense, action can be put in service of an inclusionary feminist movement.

### **Solidarity Moving Forward**

I have focused on the ways in which Arendt both attaches herself to and acknowledges her identity, as well as avoids the very idea of her identity because, in her view, to overly attach herself to identity would be limiting. There is a sense in which both these positions are true. To fail to acknowledge the different lived experiences of individuals would be to assume that all individuals have the same privilege and access as the

abstract male citizen. But to focus only on the ways in which we are different creates competing groups, and to call attention to difference can sometimes lead to danger for the group that is different. Not to mention, markers of one's identity are not all that makes up a person, and to suggest someone be characterized only by their ethnic/racial identity, gender identity or religious identity is essentialist, reductive, and limiting. Therefore, there must be a concept that allows for both relationships to one's identity to coexist. Arendt's concept of solidarity, in fact, transcends both these positions. She does not advocate for the erasure of one's identity, nor does she propose one be defined by it. Instead, action allows for equality and difference to exist at the same time, which is a very positive idea around which solidarity can form (Allen).

Some theorists suggest that Arendt provides a very fruitful concept of solidarity. Maria Markus does so by highlighting Arendt's own relationship to her identity, particularly, her womanhood. She posits how, just because Arendt does not explicitly acknowledge her gender, does not mean she does not formulate a productive concept of solidarity that is useful for feminism. In her article "The 'Anti-Feminism' of Hannah Arendt," Markus notes that there is a tendency in contemporary feminism to reject women thinkers if they do not openly state their interest in feminism (Markus, 76). Their works are deemed unworthy of critical examination, and it is felt they have nothing to say about women or, if they do, their opinions must be wrong as these women are guilty of "sneaking into the men's club" (Markus, 76). However, this very demand for loyalty from woman philosophers on the part of some feminists is, in a sense, anti-feminist. Demanding women speak on their gendered experience reduces women to their essentialist sex and fails to acknowledge that women could contribute more to philosophy than only theorizing about gender. Markus, like many other supporters of

Arendt, notes that entertaining Arendt's thought provides new perspectives to feminists that they would otherwise miss out on if they were to ignore Arendt.

Markus suggests that Arendt weaves a concept of solidarity throughout her opus. She considers this concept to be more fruitful for feminism than the concept of sisterhood, which demands that all women be part of the women's movement. As demonstrated in the case of the JFB and the BDF, this approach sometimes risks the possibility of erasing the differences of certain women. The first important idea to glean from Markus is that Arendt does acknowledge her womanhood, not negatively, not positively, but as fact. Arendt once wrote to Gershom Scholem: "The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I never even felt tempted in that direction. It would be like saying that I was a man and not a woman... that is, to deny indisputable data of my 'own life.'" (Markus, 77). In this statement, there is no pride or gratitude for the fact of being a woman, nor is there shame. Rather, Arendt's attitude towards being a woman is simply one of acceptance (Markus, 77). While Arendt does not spend much time on the social relations of power, choosing instead to focus on generic properties of experience, she does have a term for 'other' or a disenfranchised person, namely, pariah (Markus, 78). Markus writes: "Such a hierarchization prevents the members of this latter group (or groups) from 'acting out' fully their intrinsic possibilities and potentialities. For it is only in action that a person discloses her or his 'who' nature" (Markus, 78). Yet, the pariah is denied access to the public, where this action would be performed.

As I have previously discussed, one can choose to accept one's fate as pariah, or one can attempt to rid oneself of their otherness and climb their way to parvenu status. Arendt is not subtle in her suggestion that becoming a parvenu is morally wrong, and

that one should not wish to assimilate. In this suggestion, Arendt is proposing that one owes something to the other members of their group, and that is to be unashamed of their shared markers of identity. Markus points out that, for Arendt, a person owes solidarity to their own kind. “Especially to the kind which is discriminated against, oppressed or excluded” (Markus, 79). However, Arendt’s solidarity should not be confused with blind loyalty. “Solidarity never implies for her an uncritical acceptance or a total identification. Just the opposite, it presupposes an ability to be independent in one’s judgements, to be oneself. For only by accepting ‘what’ we are can we learn ‘Who’ we are” (Markus, 79). Only by asserting action do we come to find who we are, which encompasses both our individual traits and the traits we share with others. Arendt is also aware that when one has pariah status, it cannot be their job alone to get others to embrace their otherness. In *Crises of the Republic*, Arendt writes that it could not be “the oppressed and degraded who led the way, but those who were not oppressed and not degraded but could not bear that others were” (CR, 167). Keeping in mind the definition of action, Arendt constantly underscores that we share the world with others and, if we have a love of the world as we ought to, then we should have a vested interest in the lives of others. We can see then that Arendt does, in fact, theorize quite a positive concept of solidarity which draws on the obligation of the fortunate to uplift the voices of those less fortunate.

Amy Allen also suggests that Arendt provides a positive concept of solidarity that could be more powerful than the sisterhood model of solidarity. Like Markus, Allen is not interested in saving Arendt in any way by suggesting that she was a feminist, or even by evaluating Arendt’s work from a fully feminist perspective. Instead, she seeks to find out if there is anything in Arendt’s work that might suggest members of different social



movements can form bonds across axes of gender, race, class, and sexuality. She suggests that “Arendt offers us a view of power that can enable us to thematize the solidary ties that bind members of social movements together and thus make collective resistance possible” (Allen, 98). Allen believes that Arendt’s concept of solidarity does not rely on essentialist markers of identity and, therefore, is not exclusionary. She says that this type of solidarity grows out of an interplay between identity and non-identity (Allen, 98). This refers to the fact that Arendt straddles the line of feeling a sense of responsibility to one’s identity, while at the same time, not being reduced to it. She also sometimes calls it an interplay between equality and difference, or commonality and distinction, acknowledging that we have a shared identity with others and are, at the very same time, completely unique. This supports my argument that action is emancipatory, as it underscores both the universal aspects of the human condition and accounts for the fact that we are all different. Arendt quite explicitly states this in her own words when she says: “Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live” (*HC*, 8). We are all the same insofar as we are human, but the similarities end there. What makes us different from each other is also what makes us the same, because we all have this difference in common.

Allen suggests that, within the contemporary identity politics debate, there is an increasing need for collectivities that do not appeal to exclusionary identity categories. She suggests that we are in a bit of a gridlock. We are encouraged to embrace identities such as womanhood so that we can discuss our shared experience and common goals as women and to unite the feminist movement. Simultaneously, we are told to reject all identity categories because they can be exclusionary.

Early second-wave feminists saw no problem with brandishing the slogan ‘sisterhood is powerful’; implicit in this slogan is an appeal to the common interests of women, a call for a response to a shared experience (oppression) that binds women together as sisters, in other words, an appeal to solidarity (at least in one sense of that term). However, by the late 1980s the critique of any notion of the common interests of women, the common oppression of women, even the category of women *per se*, was in full swing. In the wake of this critique, the sisterhood model of solidarity has been shown to rely upon exclusionary notions of women or of women’s experience. In other words, the feminist critique of identity politics seemed to necessitate a corresponding critique of solidarity (Allen, 99, emphasis in original).

Feminists were faced with two diametrically opposed options. Either embrace identity categories as fixed or reject identity completely (Allen, 100). Allen suggests that neither option is satisfactory because “neither of these positions can do justice to a feminism that attempts to understand the multiple array of axes of stratification in contemporary western societies” (Allen, 100). This is the choice between identity and non-identity. Allen suggests that Arendt does not force us to choose either one of these positions. Instead, she blends the two together.

Many feminist interpreters of Arendt have sought to uncover whether Arendt abides by the identity model or the non-identity model. But this dichotomy does not exist in Arendt’s work. Allen writes:

But Arendt herself insists that the central concepts of the *vita activa* – labor, work and action – do not correspond to any particular set of gendered historical or sociological categories. On the contrary, in her attempt to ‘think what we are doing’, Arendt’s focus is on ‘the most elementary articulations of the human condition . . . those activities that . . . are within the range of every human being’ (1958: 5). Thus, Arendt believes that the capacity to act in concert with others in the public sphere, which is what Arendt calls power, is neither masculine nor feminine, but distinctively human (Allen, 103).

As such, Arendt’s concept of solidarity would be one that embraces different markers of identity, acting in concert together. Solidarity, for Arendt, is a concept that relies on the enfranchised speaking for the disenfranchised. It also relies on the notion that

“difference *is* our human condition” and what makes us different is what makes us equal, because we are all equally different (Cutting-Gray, 41). Therefore, Arendt’s solidarity is not about streamlining to reflect the interests of the dominant group that makes up the movement but, instead, reflecting the interests of all the individuals that make up the movement, where the dominant speaks up for the less dominant.

Because we all have difference in common, and aspects of our identity that we wish to be protected, it is our responsibility to be interested in everyone’s difference. Plurality holds that we embrace difference, not turn a blind eye to it. Therefore, group solidarity cannot rely on sameness. Keeping in mind that sameness, uniformity, and the suggestion that one type of people is superior to another is where mass movements and totalitarianism stem from, Arendt would never support this notion as a solid foundation for the women’s movement. Arendt writes: “This unitedness of many into one is basically antipolitical; it is the very opposite of the togetherness prevailing in political or commercial communities... From the viewpoint of the world and the public realm, life and death and everything attesting to sameness are non-worldly, antipolitical, truly transcendent experiences” (*HC*, 214-215). Arendt is essentially saying that relying on sameness as a jumping-off point for a movement is definitive of the blob, the mass, or the social. Arendt states in *The Human Condition* that action would be unnecessary if we were all the same because we would not need to communicate our individual needs or desires. Action would also be impossible if we had no commonality because then we could not communicate with one another. We could not help each other to achieve the common good. This is what Allen refers to as the “dialectical relationship of equality within distinction, commonality within difference” (Allen, 107). The power of solidarity, then, rests on a group’s ability to act together in concert, recognizing one

another's differences. Allen writes: "Drawing on Arendt, we can view solidarity as the collective power that grows out of action in concert, binds members of the feminist movement together, and enables feminists to build coalitions with other oppositional social movements" (Allen, 112).

Theoretically, this is a call to action that women of different races, religions, sexualities, and class backgrounds work together to include one another, again using the model of the dominant lifting the less dominant. Allen illuminates that, for Arendt, one need not be subordinated to resist subordination. "A consideration of Arendt's work thus prompts a shift from thinking of solidarity among women as the power of sisterhood to thinking of solidarity among feminists (women and men) as the power of those who pledge to work together to fight relations of subordination" (Allen, 113). Arendt is insistent that we make a commitment to perform action together in public. "Arendt understands power as 'the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.'" (Allen, 113). It is the power that arises out of the obligation to act together which is solidarity. As such, a concept of solidarity which accounts for equality and distinction is a moral imperative to which we are beholden.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, by examining Arendt's analysis of identity, it becomes clear that she was not oblivious to the matter. By closely reading *Rahel Varnhagen*, one finds there is a deliberation of gender and ethnic/racial identity. That is, Arendt contemplates, through Varnhagen's words, the identity of womanhood and Jewish identity. Varnhagen was limited in her life by the fact she was Jewish and faced anti-Semitism. The only way for her to break into high society was by denouncing her Jewishness. This, she thought, was

how she would secure her marriageability to the right man. But Arendt paints a clear moral lesson in *Rahel Varnhagen*. When one is different or when one is ‘other,’ they become ostracized from society. They are a pariah; a pariah who attempts to rid themselves of their otherness is a parvenu. The parvenu may be successful in assimilating, but they will always live a lie. Arendt suggests it is better to live authentically and honestly in a community with other pariahs than try all one’s life to be a parvenu. Arendt shows us this by telling us that on her deathbed, Varnhagen regretted spending her life trying to assimilate. She wished she had embraced her Jewish identity and her pariah status. Arendt also illuminates that Varnhagen contributed something great to Berlin society. She hosted a salon, which was a display of her action, so Varnhagen displayed aspects of her true self, her distinctiveness, and her uniqueness, even if she went to great lengths to try to conceal it. Ultimately, even in the process of trying to hide her identity, Varnhagen’s otherness, and sharing her action with others, made her a significant person in history and a positive force.

Arendt’s interest in Varnhagen as a topic demonstrates that Arendt believed theorizing the intersection of gender and ethnicity was important, especially in understanding how oppression is experienced across different lines of identity. The mere fact Arendt chose to write a biography of a Jewish woman tells us that Arendt thought it was a story to be shared. But just as Arendt devotes time in the text detailing Varnhagen’s many tribulations, she also focuses on her accomplishments. The salon as a female public sphere is an example of how women, despite the many constraints they may face, can create a space that enables them to achieve independence, as well as enrich the lives of those around them. The salon, while it takes place inside the home, is a meeting place for discourse, performance, and the sharing of action. Quite literally,

having dialogue and sharing art, poetry, music, politics, philosophy and current events is action, encapsulated. Hosting a salon was doubly significant for Jewish salonnières because it freed them from having to marry Jewish spouses not of their choosing, opting instead to assert agency and carve out their own space in high society. While those who attended salons were typically members of high society, the purpose of the salon was to underline how we are all connected, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or class background. Those who attended salons connected across lines of identity and related to one another based on shared humanity. Although a microcosm, action occurred within the salon, even more so than in the Greek polis and the public spheres it inspired. The salon allows for moments of intimacy and conversations that may otherwise be deemed inappropriate for the political arena and, most importantly, fosters and relies on the participation of women. As such, it can serve as a model for the public sphere.

The abstract citizen is typically considered a white male. As women and racialized people began to enter the public sphere, they had to identify themselves as something other than white male. The concept of citizen was not built with all people in mind, therefore, those on the perimeter had to draw attention to this fact. Yet, when people focus too much on the ways in which they are different, they begin to lose sight of achieving a common good together. Not to mention, civil life can be dangerous for anyone who is not the abstract citizen and who draws too much attention to their otherness. As such, there is a need for a world that balances the tension between sameness and difference, equality, and distinction. The concept which embodies this idea is action. However, the solution to the problem of identity politics is not as simple as motivating different groups to collaborate to achieve a common good. This typically cannot occur when solidarity is not properly fostered.

One must use the tenets of action when fostering inclusion. This means that individual identity must be accounted for, recognized and honoured, not squashed, and silenced. In the case of the BDF and the JFB, the dominant feminist group in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century was not able to embrace the difference of a feminist group with a different ethnic religion. These groups had a great many common goals and yet, because of the pervasive anti-Semitism of the time, their difference in ethnic religion made their shared goals of achieving emancipation and gender equality, and their shared experience of sexism, null. Jewish women in Germany at this time faced the double burden of sexism and anti-Semitism. They appealed to their gentile/Christian sisters, as they were keenly aware that women with more privilege had the ability to shift the anti-Semitic attitudes of those around them. Ultimately, the way in which anti-Semitism pitted these two groups of women against each other made it so that the goal of gender equality could not be achieved. While this no doubt had mostly to do with the fact that the Nazis seized power of Germany, it is an example of the line one can trace between the squashing of action and fascism. When action is not able to be exercised, everyone becomes more susceptible to totalitarianism. When solidarity cannot be achieved, feminism ceases to exist, altogether.

As such, we must carefully straddle the line of equality and distinction. We cannot draw attention to our differences so much that we lose sight of the common good, but we cannot be oblivious to individual lived experience, and the way oppression is felt differently across intersecting lines of identity. There is a concept of solidarity that can be extracted from Arendt. She does not suggest that we erase identity, nor does she propose that it define us. Arendt's solidarity relies on the notion that both positions can exist at the same time. Arendt suggests we owe something to those of our group identity

and that we must not try to eschew our immutable characteristics. Nevertheless, we are to remain critical of everything everyone does, even if we share traits with them. To not approach members of our group with the same critical eye as we would others is to disrespect them and reduce them to the essentialist markers of their identity. Allen and Markus suggest that we must keep Arendt's definition of action in mind. "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone who ever lived, lives, or will live" (*HC*, 8). Being different is what makes us equal because we all have difference in common. When this difference acts in concert together, that is solidarity.

Moving forward with this concept of solidarity, one finds that action is emancipatory and accounts for intersectionality within feminism. It is Arendt's view that the enfranchised must speak up for the disenfranchised. Arendt may not explicitly present herself in a way that is feminist, but by uplifting the voice of a German-Jewish salonnière of the eighteenth-century, by highlighting the salon as a place for women to act as intellectual equals with men, by criticizing the concept of the abstract citizen through her use of the term man, and by coining action, a concept that both transcends and embraces identity, she delivers a concept of solidarity. Placing emphasis on inclusion and honouring identity, Arendt provides a vehicle for women's liberation, which is inherently feminist.



## Conclusion

In closing, an examination of Arendt's work, particularly *The Human Condition*, reveals a feminist voice. It may be an unorthodox and unlikely place to search for feminist arguments, but if one chooses to embark on this journey, their search will prove worthwhile. Arendt's conceptualization of *vita activa*, namely labor, work, and action, indicates a gendered understanding. While Arendt did not think it necessary to gender these concepts, they have implications on gender. As I have shown, it is not productive to examine Arendt only from a gynocentric or phallogocentric lens, suggesting she either praises feminine traits or masculine traits. One can choose to believe that the abstraction she lays out in *The Human Condition* is male-stream, or matriarchal, depending on one's perspective. Yet, neither one of these interpretations is necessary, as we do not need to answer the question of whether Arendt thought like a man or like a woman. Rather, our question both as feminists and simply as readers ought to centre around what Arendt did think and offer to the canon. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt offers the universal and egalitarian concept of action, a radical concept that accounts for the individual contributions of all humans:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men and the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world... Plurality is the condition of action because 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*, 7-8).

She tells us that we ought to constantly exert our action in the public sphere, by disclosing ourselves to others, as this will save us from totalitarianism. It will also affirm our identity and make us equal and fulfilled in the world. When people perform all three

elements of the tripartite human condition in a balanced way, there is no room for gender inequality or inequality of any kind. But ensuring that all people can perform action, however, is a complex project.

Simply because Arendt does not explicitly identify herself as a feminist, and sometimes distances herself from the feminist movement, does not mean there is not a feminist understanding in her work. As a victim of the Holocaust Arendt's primary focus is exposing the cause of totalitarianism and the mass eradication of the Jewish people. An exploration of the three elements of *vita activa* reflects a gendered intelligence. By stating that laboring in the private realm alone, divorced from work and action, does not lead to a fulfilled human life, and that work alone, without being counteracted with labor and action, will leave one lonely and atomized, Arendt is launching all people, both men and women, into the public sphere to perform action, and to perform all three activities in a non-gendered way. If one conceives of labor as feminine and work as masculine, suggesting that all people perform both shuts down the notion that men and women should perform separate prescribed tasks. Likewise, even if one does not examine these concepts from a lens of binary gender, one still finds that Arendt is adamant that all humans possess the same fundamental and universal capacity to act, meaning that all people are truly equal in the sense that everyone can equally be "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words" (*HC*, 25).

Different feminist interpreters of Arendt offer different ways of reading Arendt. Both Mary Dietz and Kimberly Maslin urge us not to determine whether Arendt is praising women or men but, rather, decipher how the human condition is and can be experienced by women. Maslin writes that the "'woman problem' occurs when constant

engagement in labor and lack of solitude lead to a self-denial in which loneliness becomes an ontological condition rather than an intermittent reality, thereby precluding the kind of connectedness necessary for political action” (Maslin, 586). On the rare occasion that Arendt did write explicitly on the topic of women, like in *On the Emancipation of Women* she claims that it would be women’s economic liberation that would be their emancipation. Arendt goes one step further to say that only when women have the freedom to be wage earners and not simply caring labourers in the private/domestic sphere will they be truly emancipated. In this sense, Arendt is expounding a primary tenet of feminism, which is consistent with the recommendations that she puts forth in *The Human Condition* regarding how people ought to exercise labor, work, and action, equally.

The blurring of the public and private realms that Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*, leads to the rise of the social sphere. Because there is a loss of action in the social sphere, the social sphere is synonymous with gender inequality. If action is the equal capacity for everyone to act, then hindering this action disables certain people from acting. In a world where gender inequality is rampant, the people disabled from action are women. The social sphere is a place where a gendered division of labour is heightened, so by making a critique of the social realm and the danger it poses for suppressing action, Arendt is emancipating men and women, alike, from a gendered division of labour.

An examination of Pitkin’s essay “Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social” helps draw out the fact that a critique of the social is a critique of conformism, complacency, commercial society, and gender roles. It exposes how these things lead to a loss of individuality, and

subsequently increase the risk of totalitarianism. The social is what helps us to best understand totalitarianism and the conditions that are necessary for it to occur. People must become lonely, isolated, and alienated for totalitarianism to take hold. Once loneliness, and the feeling of being disconnected from oneself and others takes hold, individuals can be controlled by a mass or a blob. Thus, the only way to avoid this loneliness is to be in the company of others and to assert individuality. Specifically, to disclose ourselves to one another in the public sphere. Women's denial from public space is emblematic of the social, where there is the denial of half the population from exercising action, disclosing themselves, and having their identity affirmed.

To say that women are equally capable as men is inconsequential because if women have historically been denied power and access to the public sphere, they are not on an equal playing field with men. To say nothing of the fact that women are responsible for the majority of biologically grounded tasks in the private sphere, so the choice to act in the public sphere will not be particularly appealing if women must continue to labor in the private sphere (*OEW*, 67). We cannot hold Arendt accountable for solving this issue, but we can use her theory of action to guide us to a more equitable society. Andrea Thuma's interpretation of action shows us that a vital criterion for agency is having a space of alternatives, meaning that only when there is an alternative for assuming the responsibilities of the public and private sphere will women truly have the freedom of choice (Thuma, 5).

Arendt's interest in Rahel Varnhagen as a topic demonstrates that Arendt believed theorizing the intersection of gender and ethnicity was important, especially in understanding how oppression is experienced across different lines of identity. The mere fact Arendt chose to write a biography of a Jewish woman tells us that Arendt thought it

was a story to be shared. Arendt displays not just how anti-Semitism is felt, but how anti-Semitism is felt by a woman, specifically. Arendt also demonstrates how barriers to action can be subverted when women carve out their own spaces for action, like in the salon. Seyla Benhabib indicates that those who attended salons connected across lines of identity and related to one another based on shared humanity. The salon allows for moments of intimacy and conversations that may otherwise be deemed inappropriate for the political arena and relies on the participation of women. As such, it can serve as a model for the public sphere where women can perform action.

Arendt is only useful for feminism if it is a feminism which takes into consideration intersecting identities. Action perfectly encapsulates how humans are all equal insofar as they are human, but that is where the similarities end. Therefore, our differences must be honoured, but also must not hinder our ability to relate to one another, thus disabling us from achieving a common good. While collaborating in solidarity is important, it cannot come at the price of a group or individual foregoing their identity. Arendt would caution drawing attention to one's otherness and mobilizing around it, as this makes it easier for a group to become massed. Arendt exposes a way to straddle the line of acknowledging identity while not being defined by it. Action holds that, "Plurality is the condition of action because 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). Moving forward with this concept of solidarity, one finds that action is emancipatory and accounts for intersectionality within feminism.

Arendt chose not to write explicitly on the topic of gender, choosing instead to theorize generic properties of experience, loneliness, Jewish identity, and totalitarianism.

While many of her critics are quick to say that Arendt is anti-feminist, and that her text *The Human Condition* is a masculinist and phallogocentric work, Arendt theorizes the emancipatory concept of action which can be put in service of the feminist movement. Action is the universal concept that accounts for the fact that we all share the world, but that we have a responsibility to impart something unique that wholly belongs to the individual, and to the world. Arendt insists that all people possess the same fundamental capacity for action. As such, Arendt provides a vehicle for women's liberation through action. To provide this avenue for women's liberation is a feminist act. By exploring the gendered aspects of the three elements of *vita activa*, Arendt's public and private realms, and the intersection of Jewish identity and womanhood, one finds a feminist politics located in Arendt's *The Human Condition*.

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