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**Sisterhood, Natality, Queer:  
Reframing Feminist Interpretations of  
Hannah Arendt**

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) did not theorize gender as a political question. None of her major works deal with women's liberation, women's rights, or with gendered aspects of power. In her public life, she neither participated nor spoke up in favor of any feminist group. Yet, her works have generated a rich and polyphonic tradition of feminist scholarship. This dissertation provides the first monograph length, systematic examination of four decades of feminist responses to Arendt's political thought.

In this study I ask how and for what purposes have feminist interpreters of Arendt singled out concepts and topics for scrutiny and debate in their efforts to understand the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's oeuvre. Why has precisely Hannah Arendt been so widely and passionately read by feminist theorists, despite the fact that she did not engage in this field of inquiry at all?

By analyzing and contextualizing how each text in feminist secondary literature on Arendt constitutes a distinct response to her silence on gender, and by then grouping these responses, this study finds that feminist efforts to make sense of the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's political thinking can best be understood through a threefold categorization. First, Anglophone, early second wave sisterhood-interpretations approach Arendt through the conceptual pairs of "the public" and "the private", and "the social and the political", arriving at the conclusion that Arendt is a masculine anti-feminist. Second, Continental, French and Italian interpretations on the other hand operate with Arendt's concept of "natality" and regard Arendt as a female genius. Finally, postmodern and queer readings highlight concepts such as "unique distinctness", "speech and action" and "pariahdom", establishing Arendt as a precursor to feminist elaborations on performativity as well as critiques of identity politics. I contend that taken together, these three feminist perspectives form a prism through which not only Arendt's enigmatic silence on gender becomes meaningful, but also the history of contemporary feminist political theorizing emerges as a highly polyphonic tradition. Hence, there is no single, univocal feminist theory or feminism that can be applied to Arendt's texts in order to answer the question of how and why she left questions related to gender and sexuality unanswered. Instead, Arendt's account on gender and sexuality can only be grasped through multiple perspectives and multiple feminist voices.



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## Introduction

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) did not theorize gender as a political question. None of her major works deal with women's liberation, women's rights, or with gendered aspects of power. In her public life, she neither participated nor spoke up in favor of any feminist group. In fact, the single published text where Arendt explicitly reflects on the women's movement of her time is a brief book review of Alice Rühle-Gerstel's *Das Frauenproblem in der Gegenwart* (1932).<sup>1</sup> Although Arendt found the book "instructive" and "stimulating," she did not see a women's political party or a women's movement as the solution to women's economic and social oppression. Instead, she proposed that women should unite with movements of other oppressed groups, such as the workers' movement, in their plight for the realization of equal political rights (EU 67-68).

In this study I argue that despite the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's philosophy, and despite her reluctance to support any of the numerous women's movements of her time, Arendt's voluminous life work has generated an entire tradition of feminist responses. Ranging from Adrienne Rich's famous lamentation that *The Human Condition* exemplifies the "tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology" to Julia Kristeva's characterization of Arendt as a "female genius," to Mario Feit's claim that "*The Human Condition* offers a thorough critique of heteronormativity," for four decades scholars have debated and further developed Arendt's philosophy for feminist purposes. Arendt's silence on gender constitutes a riddle that continues to perplex both her most passionate critics as well as her most enthusiastic followers.

This dissertation provides the first monograph-length, systematic examination of feminist responses to Arendt's silence on gender. I ask how and for what purposes have feminist interpreters of Arendt singled out concepts and topics for scrutiny and debate in their efforts to understand from a feminist perspective the absence of a theory of gender in

<sup>1</sup> Rühle-Gerstel, Alice (1932) *Das Frauenproblem in der Gegenwart - Eine psychologische Bilanz*, Stuttgart: S. Hirzel Verlag. Arendt's review was first published in the German journal *Die Gesellschaft* (vol. 10/1932, pp. 177-179), a journal of the Weimar socialists. The review was translated into English by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and published as "On the Emancipation of Women" in Arendt's *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, New York: Schocken Books, 1994. In her review Arendt acknowledges the achievements of the women's liberation movement, such as "the right to vote" and the "right to run for office," and laments the fact that: "[...] although today's women have the same rights legally as men, they are not valued equally by society. Economically, their inequality is reflected in the fact that in many cases they work for considerably lower wages than men." (EU, 66). Anticipating Betty Friedan, Arendt also expresses criticism towards women's position in the marriage institution.

Arendt's oeuvre. Why has precisely Hannah Arendt been so widely and passionately read by feminist theorists, despite the fact that she did not engage in this field of inquiry at all?

I approach the vast and rich feminist secondary literature on Arendt through a reading strategy by which I parallel, compare and contrast texts from different historical time periods and geographical contexts. I examine the ways in which each particular text constitutes a response to Arendt's silence on gender and then arrange the interpretations accordingly. My research approach illuminates the polyphony within the long tradition of feminist responses to Arendt, and stresses the fact that different feminist perspectives highlight and operate with highly divergent and contrasting concepts in Arendt. Hence, there is more than one way to respond to Arendt's silence on gender from a feminist perspective. Based on my thorough review of extensive secondary literature on Arendt, I argue that feminist responses to Arendt's silence on gender can best be understood through the following, threefold, analytical categorization.

I propose first, that Anglophone, early second wave feminist interpretations of Arendt generally approach her work through a 'sisterhood' framework. For scholars such as Adrienne Rich (1979), Mary O' Brien (1981), Hanna Pitkin (1981) and Wendy Brown (1988), Arendt's silence on gender signifies a disappointing, elitist arrogance and hostility towards the women's movement and feminist politics of the time. The sisterhood readings argue that despite the fact that Arendt was a woman in a male-dominated occupation, she did not express interest or solidarity towards the women's movements of her time. Quite the contrary, through her rigid conceptual distinctions, such as "the public" vs. "the private," "the political" vs. "the social" and "action" vs. "labor," early second wave interpreters conclude that Arendt succumbed to a male bias in her thinking. Framing "the human" in *The Human Condition* as a universal category, Arendt, much like male thinkers throughout the Western tradition, failed to see this category as an abstraction which excludes women's perspectives. Furthermore, in their analysis, early second wave readers conceive Arendt herself as a masculine woman and an anti-feminist. I argue that the readings that frame Arendt as a *masculine* thinker draw primarily from the second chapter of *The Human Condition*, which is titled "The Public and the Private Realm."

A divergent way of appropriating Arendt emerges in the context of the continental tradition of feminist theorizing. According to scholars, such as Adriana Cavarero (1990) and Julia Kristeva (1999) most notably, the theoretical implications of Arendt's silence on gender must not be exaggerated. Instead, both Cavarero and Kristeva perceive Arendt's contribution to feminist theorizing to be evident in her work because her texts derive from a particular, feminine position. Since Arendt is a woman, her writing inevitably reflects this experience,

and the interpreter's task is to elaborate on the feminine, textual style. I argue that these two major French and Italian receptions within the continental, phenomenological and psychoanalytic feminist tradition focus particularly on vocabulary in Arendt's texts that is taken to reflect feminine experiences, such as "natality," "birth" and "life." The notion of "natality" in particular, is seen as Arendt's most important and revolutionary contribution to feminist theorizing of sexual difference. In these French and Italian readings, the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, which deals with action and new beginnings, functions as the background for concluding that Arendt is a *feminine* writer and even more importantly, a female genius.

In contrast to these two opposing feminist ways of appropriating Arendt, a third feminist perspective on Arendt's silence on gender builds on postmodern theorizing. Albeit the fact that Arendt did not say much about women's issues or gender inequality in her written work, these theorists still view her work as highly valuable for feminist theorizing because Arendt is claimed to anticipate major questions and conceptualizations within postmodern feminist theorizing and emerging queer thought. Bonnie Honig (1988, 1993), Mary G. Dietz (1995), Linda Zerilli (1995) and Amy Allen (1999), most notably, focus on Arendt's formulations such as "the disclosure of the agent in speech and action," "unique distinctness," "spontaneity," "indeterminacy," "freedom" and "solidarity" and critique identity politics through Arendt. I argue that this reading strategy also operates in texts by feminist theorists who defend Arendt's perceived postmodern leaning by examining "Jewishness" and "gender" as analogous, culturally-constructed identity categories in Arendt's texts (Ring 1997; Bar On 2002; Hull 2002; Butler 2012). The efforts to formulate various directions for postmodern "Arendtian feminism" have also influenced and inspired a number of gay studies and queer-theoretical interpretations in which Arendt emerges as a protagonist and spokesperson for marginalized and persecuted groups, homosexual men in particular (Kramer 1988; Kaplan 1997; Eribon 1999; Warner 1999; Feit 2011). The main textual resources for postmodern and queer interpretations include the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, a number of Arendt's essays on Jewishness and Jewish politics, as well as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

These research results show that three distinguishable feminist positions emerge from the numerous attempts to understand Arendt's silence on gender. Whereas sisterhood interpretations view Arendt as a masculine anti-feminist, femininity interpretations on the other hand regard Arendt as a female genius, and finally, postmodern and queer readings view Arendt as a precursor to feminist elaborations of performativity as well as critiques of identity politics.

Despite the fact that Arendt scholarship has undergone a renaissance during the past two decades, prior to this dissertation there have been only a few attempts to interpret, contextualize and arrange *feminist* receptions of Arendt. The articles by Mary G. Dietz (1991; 1995; 2002), Bonnie Honig (1995), Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1982/2004; 1996) and Kimberly Maslin (2013) are among the few contributions to this field of inquiry. Although all these prior attempts discuss only the Anglophone feminist receptions and offer merely a brief and limited understanding of the complexity and nuance within feminist debates over Arendt, they are the most widely read and frequently-cited texts on the relationship between Arendt and feminism.

In *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (1982), by far the most extensive biography of Arendt to date, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl illuminates Arendt's personal and political motivations for distancing herself from feminist politics. Understanding Arendt's reluctance towards identity politics as deriving from her parting with the Zionist movement, Young-Bruehl presents Arendt as a thinker who resisted all types of ideologies and mass movements, including the various women's liberation movements (Young-Bruehl 2004, 97). In "Hannah Arendt among Feminists" (1996), Young-Bruehl moves away from biography and presents a twofold historical categorization of feminist responses to Arendt. According to Young-Bruehl, during the first phase, which lasted from roughly 1975 until the late 1980s, "liberationist," "cultural" and "gynocentric" feminist theorists targeted and rejected Arendt's distinctions between "the public" and "the private" as well as "the social" and "the political" in multiple ways. A second generation of feminist interpretations of Arendt emerged in the mid-1980s. This "younger generation" problematized the previous generation's interpretative framework, which rested on a strict, binary conception of gender (Young-Bruehl 1996).

In her essays, such as "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics" (1991), "Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt" (1995), "The Woman Question in Arendt" (2002) and "The Arendt Question in Feminism" (2002), Mary G. Dietz also categorizes feminist responses to Arendt by presenting a typology of various types of feminisms, such as "radical feminism," "difference feminism" and "diversity feminism." Dietz contextualizes the emergence of these types of feminist stances on Arendt by appeal to the history of the women's movement and feminist theorizing. The approach is repeated by Maslin (2013).

Taken together, Dietz, Honig, Young-Bruehl and Maslin present the history of feminist Arendt receptions as taking place in two distinct historical phases, and as occurring *exclusively* within the Anglophone academic context. The first phase includes second wave readings from the 1970s and 1980s. These readings are presented as being characterized

by an interest in examining what Arendt had to contribute to the women's movement. Secondly, after the 1980s and early 90s, a new generation of readers shifted the focus of inquiry and asked how might feminist theorizing look through an Arendtian conceptual framework and could feminist theorists learn something from Arendt? In Bonnie Honig's editorial introduction to the anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995) these two phases are characterized as answering one of the two problems: the "Woman Question in Arendt" and the "Arendt Question in Feminism."

In contrast and in addition to the approaches above, the ambition of my project is to give greater nuance and deeper theoretical reflection to the rich, polyphonic feminist debates over Arendt. I contend that the tradition of four decades of feminist Arendt scholarship deserves to be studied thoroughly as a distinct field of inquiry. Thus, I provide a theoretical framework for conceptualizing and answering the single, most important question that all feminist interpretations, regardless of their historical context, geographical location or theoretical commitments target, namely how should Arendt's complete silence on gender and feminist issues be understood?

Finally, a point of historical distance distinguishes my study from previous attempts to theorize feminist responses to Arendt. Twenty years have passed since the publication of Bonnie Honig's edited essay anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*. Since 1995, feminist theorizing has grown and evolved in multiple new directions, some of which I address in this study. For instance, I include gay studies and queer theoretical elaborations on Arendt's silence on gender in order to illuminate how critical studies on masculinity and queer notions of gender and sexuality have developed hand in hand with feminist readings of Arendt.

This dissertation is divided into three parts. Each part explicates a specific feminist way of responding to Arendt's silence on gender. In Part I, *An anti-feminist or a proto-feminist?* (chapters 1 and 2), I first analyze the methods, rhetoric and historical context of texts in which Arendt is interpreted as an anti-feminist and a masculine woman, and then move on to study critical responses to these interpretations. I will argue that in feminist scholarship from the late seventies through to the eighties, Arendt is generally interpreted through a "sisterhood" framework, that is, as first and foremost a woman and a fellow female political thinker working in the midst of a predominantly male-oriented tradition of Western thought. Feminist scholars, who discovered Arendt with excitement during the first height of the second wave of American feminist activism, are particularly interested in questions of socioeconomic oppression and sexual objectification of women. The rhetoric motivating these texts takes the form of women's universal "sisterhood" coalition building, solidarity,



consciousness raising and the rewriting of history from the perspective of women as an oppressed class (e.g. Rich 1979; O'Brien 1981; Pitkin 1981; Landes 1983; Pateman 1983; Brown 1988). Hence, in the interpretations by Adrienne Rich (1979), Mary O'Brien (1981), Hanna Pitkin (1981) and Wendy Brown (1988), for instance, Arendt's works are examined by asking how women, equality, embodiment, solidarity and power appear in the context of Arendt's critique of modernity in *The Human Condition*.

I argue that within the interpretative and methodological 'sisterhood' framework, Arendt's public/private distinction appears to neglect the fundamental demand that women be freed from traditional, stereotypical roles and occupations assigned to them by the male, white, heterosexist, supremacist patriarchal order. Also, contrary to the emancipatory goal of early second wave feminist consciousness raising, Arendt's demarcations appear in this framework to exclude the personal from the political. Since Anglophone, early second wave texts often operate with a notion of feminism that is incompatible with men and masculinity, they widely equate masculinity with institutional practices of patriarchy. Hence Arendt's perceived support of a rigid and patriarchal public/private distinction establishes her as a masculine anti-feminist. Despite the fact that some scholars from this same time, such as Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Jean-Betke Elshtain (1986), are critical of interpretations of Arendt as a masculine woman, nevertheless their readings leave the binary conception of gender intact. Moving Arendt to the "women's side" of the "men vs. women" and "masculine vs. feminine" binary, their way of defending Arendt rests on stressing the aspects of Arendt's work that deal with what is perceived of as women's experiences, such as power, forgiveness and birth.

Although a majority of the texts that I analyze in the first chapter of Part I are written in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Part I as a whole establishes that Arendt's reputation as an anti-feminist and masculine Grecophile is a reappearing theme throughout the three first decades of feminist secondary scholarship. I argue that this is particularly evident in the context of feminist responses to Arendt's theorization of "the body" and "the social realm." In chapters 1.2 and 2, I take these two themes as reference points for highlighting the polyphony, internal tensions and gradual shifts within feminist Arendt scholarship. Whereas early second wave critics such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981 and 1998) and Brown (1988) interpret Arendt's notions of "the body" and "the social" through the public/private distinction and see both concepts as falling on the side of the depoliticized, private realm in Arendt, Bonnie Honig (1988; 1993; 1995) on the other hand emphasizes the performative aspects of Arendt's notion of the body, gender and identity. Honig's approach is further elaborated by Margaret Betz Hull (2002) and Judith Butler (Butler 2007; Butler & Spivak 2007). Finally, in contrast to Hanna Pitkin (1998), who

interprets Arendt's distinction between "the social" and "the political" as an indication of Arendt's anti-democrat stance, Seyla Benhabib (1996) and Linda Zerilli (2005) both draw from Arendt's distinction in order to theorize her as a feminist critic of social conformism and a proponent of feminist, radical democratic thought.

My discussion throughout Part I illuminates the fact that some of the opposing ways in which feminist scholars have responded to Arendt is not merely the result of differing historical, geographical and disciplinary contexts, but is rather due to a divergent use of Arendt's concepts. In addition to the historical and thematic contextualization, my analysis draws from my discovery that there are in fact two separate sections in *The Human Condition* in which Arendt, in opposing ways, discusses the complex thematic of the public/private distinction. As *The Human Condition* is the most important text for feminist debates on Arendt's silence on gender, I will argue that the difference between feminist responses to Arendt's two discussions of the public and the private adds to our understanding of the opposing views that feminist scholars hold of Arendt. Whereas early second wave critics take inspiration from the second chapter of *The Human Condition* (titled "The Public and the Private"), Arendt's theory of action on the other hand (presented in the fifth chapter of the book) has had a profound influence on feminist elaborations of Arendt as a proto-feminist and precursor to postmodern feminist theorizing. To clarify, my aim in Part I is not to offer yet another interpretation of *The Human Condition*, but instead point out the two chapters most frequently cited in feminist readings of this text. By doing this, I demonstrate the unusual fact that an entire tradition of internally different feminist interpretations and theoretical stances has arisen from a book in which a theory of gender is entirely absent.

Through my parallel reading of opposing ways of interpreting Arendt's conceptual distinctions between the public and the private, the body, the political and the social, I establish the groundwork for the main argument of this dissertation, namely, that the rich and internally polyphonic feminist scholarship on Arendt can be best understood by examining how each theorist interprets the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's philosophy, and which conceptual clusters the interpreters operate with.

In contrast and complicate the Anglophone approaches (the anti-feminist and proto-feminist) with an alternative and opposing way of appropriating her work in Part II, *The female genius* (chapters 3 and 4). Here, I turn to discuss a family of feminist reading strategies, which unlike the feminist positions discussed in Part I, respond to Arendt's silence by teasing out an explicitly *feminine* philosophy from her texts. I will argue that, like the early, second wave Anglophone 'sisterhood' interpretations, also the two most widely

read French and Italian feminist readings within the continental philosophical tradition perceive the Western tradition of thought as a male-dominated, phallogocentric tradition. However, instead of interpreting Arendt as a masculine thinker in female disguise, Adriana Cavarero (1990) and Julia Kristeva (1999), focus on philosophical imagery in Arendt's texts that they perceive to reflect feminine experiences. Concepts such as "natality," "birth," "life," "beginnings," "sexual difference," "the maternal," "finitude," "the singular and the particular" and "relationality" function in these readings as the strategic arsenal for undoing the gridlocks of Western, male-dominated thinking.

I propose that both Cavarero and Kristeva conceive of Arendt's concept of "natality" as directly establishing her femininity as a thinker, and hence her silence on gender does not constitute an obstacle for their feminist projects. What Cavarero and Kristeva regard as more important and fruitful than interpreting Arendt's silence on gender with respect to the question of whether Arendt was an anti-feminist or a proto-feminist, is to examine how Arendt's femininity is disclosed in her writing. The underlying assumption is thus that since Arendt is a woman, her writing inevitably reflects this experience in one way or the other. In these readings, Arendt, despite never writing much on gender and sexuality, becomes the epitome of a female philosopher.

Finally, for both Cavarero and Kristeva, there is an urgent *ethical* need to rethink the Western tradition in order to articulate a feminine language that appropriates the maternal Other. Whereas Cavarero's ethical task consists in articulating a maternal ontology through Arendt and Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva carries out this ethical project by undoing the totalitarian kernels of Western rationality with the use of Arendt. Hence, for Kristeva, feminist theorizing cannot be carried out in isolation from a serious reflection and critique of totalitarian strands of thought.

My discussion and analysis in Part I and II establishes that despite their completely opposing ways of appropriating Arendt, the interpretations of Arendt as a masculine anti-feminist and the interpretations of Arendt as a female genius have in common the fact that they operate with certain, unquestioned notions of gender and sexuality. I argue that when attempting to decipher Arendt's enigmatic silence on gender, both the early, second wave Anglophone sisterhood interpretations as well as the two major, continental, femininity readings leave the underlying, binary notion of gender intact.

A more radical way of approaching the question of Arendt's silence from a feminist perspective can be found in postmodern feminist and queer responses to Arendt, which I examine in detail in Part III, *The rebel* (chapters 5 and 6). In this Part, I argue that feminist

and queer readings influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern theorizing do not look at gender and sexuality in Arendt's writings by asking whether Arendt qualifies as a feminist, whether she had anything significant to say about women, or whether or not she adopts a masculinist or a feminine position. Instead, feminist theorists such as Bonnie Honig (1988; 1993; 1995), Mary G. Dietz (1995), Amy Allen (1999), Margaret Betz Hull (2002) and Judith Butler (2007; 2012), as well as queer theorists such as Morris B. Kaplan (1997), Didier Eribon (1999) and Mario Feit (2011), are concerned with showing how feminist and queer debates on gender and sexuality might be illuminated through an Arendtian framework. This way of responding to Arendt's silence on gender differs notably from both the Anglophone, early second wave readers, as well as from the Italian and French interpretations, because the postmodern and queer readings examine and contest conventional and normative notions of gender and sexuality through and with Arendt.

I argue that operating with concepts such as "performativity," "action," "agonism," "spontaneity," "indeterminacy," "plurality," "cohabitation," "unique distinctness," "pariahdom" and "freedom," feminist and queer interpretations maintain that Arendt's reluctance to theorize gender as a fixed category can be interpreted as a precursor to postmodern critiques of identity politics. In Bonnie Honig's pioneering work, Arendt is perceived as a theorist of contingent foundations, constituent power and agonistic, democratic thought. For Honig, Arendt's stress on the performative disclosure of the agent in speech and action provides an important framework for theorizing gender and identity as performative. In Amy Allen's reading, Arendt's notions of power and 'acting in concert' becomes the most important concepts for reinterpreting and reinventing early second wave feminist movements' key concepts, such as "solidarity" and "coalition."

According to others, such as Bat-Ami Bar On (1996; 2002), Margaret Betz Hull (2002) and Judith Butler (2012), Arendt's critique of identity politics is already evident in her early essays on Jewish identity. For this reason, in chapter 5, I examine postmodern feminist interpretations of Arendt conjointly with feminist interpretations of Arendt's relation to Jewishness. Through a discussion of these feminist perspectives, in chapter 6, I will argue that queer theorists and gay studies scholars pick the question of gender and Jewishness in Arendt as a key theme to provide a theoretical justification for the plight of gay rights. Tracing back the invention of "Jews" and "homosexuals" as pathological races to the rise of eighteenth-century European anti-Semitism, Kaplan (1997) and Eribon (1999) argue that Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* contains an important genealogy of gay subjectivation.

Taken together, the three parts of this dissertation arrange the rich and polyphonic tradition

of feminist Arendt scholarship into three distinct feminist responses to Arendt's silence on gender. What I term here the sisterhood readings, arrive at the conclusion that Arendt is a masculine anti-feminist, whereas the femininity readings hold Arendt to be a female genius. Finally, postmodern and queer interpretations see Arendt as a rebellious precursor to critiques of identity politics and as a spokesperson for persecuted, marginalized persons.



## **Part I**

### **An anti-feminist or proto-feminist?**

## 1. The masculine Grecophilia of Hannah Arendt

*The Human Condition* (1958) is by far the most widely read and frequently cited text within four decades of feminist scholarship on Arendt. Published seven years after *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) the work outlines the philosophical groundwork for Arendt's political theory, articulated more concretely in essay collections, such as *Between Past and Future* (1961 and 1968), and *Crises of the Republic* (1972).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of *The Human Condition*, Arendt tells that her approach consists of a philosophical and historical analysis of the conditions that constitute and shape human existence. Clarifying her position as non-essentialist, Arendt writes that "[...] the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature" (HC, 9-10).

The topic of the book is human existence, but it is difficult to classify the study as belonging to any specific discipline or even a conventionally understood theoretical position. The text contains among other things an extensive critique of modernity, an ethics of forgiveness, a historical analysis of the rise of mathematical models for explaining social phenomena, nearly eighty pages of analysis on the nature of action (*praxis*) as well as a genealogy of Western philosophy's hierarchical demarcation between theoretical philosophy and political life. To quote Margaret Canovan in the introduction to the 1998 edition of the text: "[b]oth the book's difficulty and its enduring fascination arise from the fact that she [Arendt] is doing a great many things at once. There are more intertwined strands of thought than

<sup>2</sup> Arendt originally titled *The Human Condition Amor Mundi* (love of the world), which expressed her gratitude for the world (HAKJ, Aug 6, 1955). The title *The Human Condition* was chosen by Arendt's American publisher. In her research following the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt had sought to understand totalitarian elements in Marxism. She was working on an extensive book manuscript on Marx's thinking, but never published it. Instead, the manuscript was published as two different books, which became *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* (1963). The remainder of the manuscript parts were published posthumously as the edited essay collection *The Promise of Politics* (2005). A brief biographical detail about Arendt illuminates her interest in Marx: Arendt was brought up in a liberal, leftist intellectual environment. Her mother, Martha Arendt was a leftist activist and an admirer of Rosa Luxemburg. During Arendt's youth years at Heidelberg and Marburg, she spent much of her time in socialist, intellectual circles in which she also met her first husband Günter Stern. When Arendt met her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, he was a lecturer and socialist activist who encouraged Arendt to read Marx, Trotsky and Weber (Young-Buehl 2004. See also Palonen 2008). Although Arendt's first major work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, draws bold parallels between fascist and communist forms of totalitarianism, and although she presents a critique of Marxism throughout her career, her stress on the importance of the right to belong to a political community, and the importance of companionship, solidarity, communication and acting together for a common goal, originate from her early involvement in the socialist movements. *The Human Condition* and its chapters on "World Alienation" among other texts, contain an explicit, Weberian critique of capitalist individualism (HC, 251-256; cf. Kalyvas 2008).



can possibly be followed at first reading, and even repeated readings are liable to bring surprises” (Canovan 1998, viii).

One aspect that the rich, complex and multifaceted text clearly does not contain is a reflection on gendered aspects human existence. Unlike her contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, who had theorized gender and sexuality through an existentialist framework in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) almost ten years before the publication of *The Human Condition*, Arendt shows no interest in analyzing women’s condition as separate from that of men. Instead she writes: “ ‘[w]hat we are doing’ is indeed the central theme of this book. It deals only with the most elementary articulations of the human condition, with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of *every human being*” (HC, 5).<sup>3</sup>

In the discussion that follows (chapters 1-2), I will argue that in the context of Anglophone feminist Arendt interpretations, both Arendt’s critics, as well as her sympathizers find *The Human Condition* to be the best indication of Arendt’s lack of knowledge and interest in feminist history and political theorizing. Arendt is widely perceived as carrying out her conceptual distinctions in a manner that does not acknowledge the inherently gendered, hierarchical aspects of demarcations, such as “the public” and “the private” and “the political” and “the social” (Hull 2002, 144-146). Yet, feminist scholars disagree on the implications that the absence of a gendered perspective in Arendt’s thinking has for feminist theorizing. On one hand, Arendt is perceived as a masculinist and anti-feminist, and on the other hand she is interpreted as a proto-feminist.

I construct my argument in Part I by comparing and contrasting the opposing ways in which Anglophone feminist theorists from different historical contexts interpret “the public” and “the private,” “the social” and “the body” in Arendt’s texts. I am particularly interested in examining how and for what purpose Anglophone readers have singled out precisely these concepts, and not some other concepts, such as “natality” and “new beginnings” for

<sup>3</sup> Secondary and biographical literature rarely mention the fact that Arendt was once asked to write a review of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. However, in a letter to William Cole, dated December 16, 1952, Arendt resigned from submitting the book review for publication. Arendt wrote: “The objective problem of the book is to treat sex as a social phenomenon. The problem itself is of course entirely legitimate. But it so happens that [in the book] sex as proactive force is the fundament of society while, in another sense, it always has been an anti-social power. The two saving graces in a discussion of sex as a social phenomenon would be a sense of humor and reverential awe for love. Discussions which move beyond love and humor have a tendency to become plain ridiculous [...] I have the impression that this book does not always succeed in avoiding this danger and that its author is curiously unaware of it” (quoted in Ludz 1993/2006, 350-351).

critical scrutiny, discussion and debate. Through my reading strategy of comparing and contrasting I intend to tease out the underlying textual and argumentative logic of both the interpretations that frame Arendt as an anti-feminist, as well as the readings of Arendt as a proto-feminist.

First, I elaborate on the role of Arendt's conception of "the political," "the public" and "the private" in the readings of Anglophone feminist scholars, who discovered *The Human Condition* shortly after Arendt's sudden and unexpected death in 1975.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that scholars working within the historical context of early second wave feminist theorizing, interpret Arendt's conception of politics as gender blind and as being directly derivative from her dismissal of the private realm of the household, and the embodied labor of women.

Second, I will examine how feminist theorists working on deciphering Arendt's enigmatic conception of the body in this text and elsewhere complicate and problematize these early readings. I show how the body constitutes an interpretative challenge for feminist Arendt scholars from diverging theoretical backgrounds and historical contexts, first because Arendt does not theorize the gendered aspects of embodiment, and second because she is not clear on which side of the public/private divide the body belongs. Finally, I will discuss three readings of Arendt's critique of modernity and the rise of 'the social.' In these elaborations, Arendt's critical attitude towards modernity becomes the ground for theorizing Arendt as an anti-democrat (Pitkin 1998) on the one hand, and as a "reluctant modernist" (Benhabib 1996) and precursor to radical democratic theorizing on the other (Zerilli 2005). Whereas Hanna Pitkin's framing is influenced by the early second wave critiques of Arendt, Benhabib and Zerilli both move beyond these debates and examine how Arendt can be utilized for theorizing feminist public spaces and for articulating a radical, feminist conception of freedom.

### **1.1 Early second wave interpreters confront 'the public' and 'the private'**

Although Hannah Arendt is today widely credited as one of the most distinguished political thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this recognition was given to her only fairly recently. When scholars such as Margaret Canovan (1974), Adrienne Rich (1976), Richard J. Bernstein (1977), Jürgen Habermas (1977), Bhikhu Parekh (1981), Sheldon Wolin (1983) and

<sup>4</sup> Arendt died of a heart attack at her home in New York City, on December 4, 1975. She was 69 years old. There are several obituaries, written by friends and colleagues, which give a picture of Arendt as a person and thinker. See, for instance, The New School for Social Research professor Hans Morgenthau's contribution in *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Feb., 1976), pp. 5-8

George Kateb (1984) published books and book chapters on Arendt's political theory in the seventies and eighties, she was by no means regarded as an equal by male academics and her status as a philosopher was disputed. This is partly because during her lifetime a large community of male, Jewish intellectuals attacked and discredited Arendt with *ad hominem* arguments after the 1963 publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt's books were for a long time on the banned list in Israel, and many works were left untranslated (Ring 1998; Villa 2008, 304; Maier-Katkin 2010). The "Eichmann controversy" cast a shadow on Arendt's credibility as a serious and rigorous scholar that lasted for many decades. Thus the dispute over Arendt's status as a serious philosopher has been an ongoing issue.

In 1983 Ann M. Lane commented on the reception of Arendt from a feminist perspective in the following way:

[T]he "tough" male critics of Arendt accuse her of political irrelevancy – a victim of "revolutionary nostalgia," living a "hopeless, helpless, vicarious life" and "grossly overrated." For them, she is too soft, too "tender," unable to live up to their rhetoric of political action and unable to distinguish fact and fantasy. (Lane 1983, 339)

Lane refers to texts by scholars such as Martin Jay, as well as to public literary reviews in media such as *The New York Times* and *Harper* magazine. George Kateb's description of the challenges of writing an academic book on Arendt during this time is illuminating. The male author must defend his choice to write on Arendt.

Her work surely can induce anxiety: Her fame depends as much on the anxiety she aroused as on anything else. She always seemed to be saying painful things, or unpleasantly exotic ones. Yet though many of those made anxious had not read her but depended on gossip, there is ample reason to come away from her work feeling unsettled. (Kateb 1984, *Preface*)

The doubt over Arendt's intellectual credibility has been a strong element in secondary scholarship and the public reception of Arendt. As Seyla Benhabib points out, Isaiah Berlin for instance has publicly claimed that he does "[...] not greatly respect the lady's ideas... she produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It's all a stream of metaphysical associations" (Jahanbegloo 1992; 82-83). In his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000), Dermot Moran sympathizes with Berlin and claims that "Arendt's practice of phenomenology is original and idiosyncratic; she exhibited no particular interest

in the phenomenological method and contributed nothing to the theory of phenomenology” (Moran 2000, 289). ”In large measure, her overall framework is heavily dependent on the philosophies of Heidegger and Jaspers and their concerns for human existence and being-in-the-world” (ibid. 318). Moran further states that: ”Benhabib, I believe, incorrectly characterizes [Isaiah] Berlin’s view of Arendt as ‘gender stereotyping’” (ibid. 508 fn 56). Benhabib on the other hand points out that Arendt’s personal relationship with her former teacher, Martin Heidegger, has also been an endless source for sexist comments and critique (Benhabib 2003; cf. Villa 2008). With the publication of *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger*, Elzbieta Ettinger’s (1995) tabloid attention-seeking book on the intimate affair between Arendt and Heidegger, Arendt was once again publicly discredited and accused, this time for being a sexually perverted Nazi sympathizer.<sup>5</sup> Due to the ”scandals” and controversies surrounding her, it took several decades of secondary scholarship for Arendt to be acknowledged as a serious and distinguished theorist.

Feminist scholars writing on Arendt during the first height of the second wave of American feminist organizing were particularly interested in questions of socioeconomic oppression and sexual objectification of women, critiques of white, male supremacy and patriarchy, as well as critiques of capitalism. The political rhetoric often took the form of universal ”sisterhood” coalition building, solidarity, consciousness raising as well as the rewriting of history from the perspective of women as an oppressed class (e.g. Rich 1979; O’Brien 1981; Pitkin 1981; Landes 1983; Brown 1988).

In this historical context, Arendt’s works were approached with similar excitement and expectations as the works of Simone de Beauvoir (Young-Bruehl 1985, 310; Dietz 1995, 17-20). As a woman, Arendt was a notable exception in her numerous achievements. She was the first woman to receive a full professorship at Princeton University, to give the highly respected Christian Gauss lectures and the first woman ever awarded with prizes such as the Sonning Prize, the Lessing Prize and the Sigmund Freud Prize. She wrote voluminously on historically remarkable women, such as Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxemburg and Karen Blixen. In addition, by being a woman and a Jew, Arendt stood out from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century elite of predominately male political thinkers and academics. Arendt as the outspoken and bravely confrontational thinker of revolution, political action, civil disobedience and public freedom, seemed to speak right to the causes that evolved during the second wave of American, feminist political organizing.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the ”Arendt scandal,” see Villa 1996; Taminaux 1997; Villa 2008.

Nevertheless, for many, Arendt turned out to be a disappointment rather than a sister in solidarity. Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), who was one of the first American feminists to write on Arendt, discovered Arendt's works in the midst of her research on historical accounts on women and lesbian workers. In an essay from 1976 titled "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women," Rich describes her shock at reading *The Human Condition*: "[t]he power of male ideology to possess such a female mind, to disconnect it as it were from the female body which encloses it and which it encloses, is nowhere more striking than in Arendt's lofty and crippled book" (Rich 1979, 212). In Rich's view, Arendt ignored both the history of women writers as well as the women's condition, and assumed that being human is equal to being male. Rich had a significant influence on her generation of Arendt receptions, most notably the readings of Mary O'Brien (1926-1998), Carole Pateman, Hanna Pitkin and Wendy Brown. In my analysis, I term these interpretations early second wave readings.

In order to examine this negative and highly critical reception of Arendt's works, I want to highlight first the specific historical context in which feminist scholars first discovered Arendt's works. By the time of Arendt's death in 1975, the second wave of American feminist activism was undergoing a rapid and explosive growth. The National Organization for Women and the Women's Liberation movement had gained wide institutional and political victory through, for instance, Betty Friedan's and the American women's national strike in 1970, the running of African-American Shirley Chisholm as a nominee for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate (1972), the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in Congress (1972), the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization (1973) as well as through the Supreme Court ruling in favor of the constitutional right to abortion in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). Not only did various women's grassroots movements and feminist activist organizations achieve wide media attention, they had also reached the academic world. Works by Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Angela Y. Davis, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich and others were read and circulated on university campuses. As a result of the nationwide, revolutionary student movement as well as feminist consciousness-raising activism, San Diego State University and SUNY Buffalo established the first Women's Studies programs in 1970 and *Feminist Studies*, the first academic journal in Women's Studies began publishing in 1972. (Cott 1987; Castro 1984/1990; Snitov 2015.)

The first curriculums aimed at transforming male-centered or gender-biased academic disciplines by integrating feminist scholarship into all fields of inquiry (Salper 2011; Howe

2000). Equally important was the inclusion of separate courses in such fields as feminist history, feminist politics and feminist pedagogy. As has been claimed by Baxandall & Gordon:

The women's liberation movement, as it was called in the sixties and seventies, was the largest social movement in the history of the United States – and probably the world. Its impact had been felt in every home, school and workplace, in every form of art, entertainment, sport, in all aspects of personal and public life in the United States. (Baxandall & Gordon 2000)

How then, could the women's liberation movement escape Arendt's attention? During the late sixties and early seventies, Arendt was conducting research on authoritarian elements in American governance. She published several critical essays on the Nixon administration, such as: "Lying and Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers" (1971) and "Washington's 'Problem-Solvers' – Where They Went Wrong" (1972). Although other texts from this time period, such as "Reflections on Violence" (1970) and "Civil Disobedience" (1970), for instance, are sympathetic with the radical and worldwide student movement, Arendt remains curiously silent on the ongoing feminist revolutionizing of academia.

Nevertheless, Arendt's works did catch the attention of feminist scholars of her time. In the historical and academic setting of early second wave feminist activism attempts to contextualize Arendt as a serious scholar emphasized her notably dense commentary on Ancient Greek thinkers in particular. Arendt's wide knowledge of Greek and Roman texts was used to legitimize her as a political philosopher comparable to male philosophers in the canon of Western thought.

As Margaret Canovan (1979) points out, a remarkable fact about *The Human Condition*, for instance, is that the reader of the book must already in the opening chapters orient herself in a terrain filled with citations, dense footnoting, paraphrases and allusions to Greek and Roman philosophers, political orators and poets. For many, such as Kateb (1984), whom I quoted above, this textual evidence justified conducting research on Arendt. Canovan states:

One striking feature of her work is her use of history, particularly Greek and Roman history. She uses it not merely to provide vivid illustrations, but, more crucially, as the means of finding an Archimedean point outside the present to which she can appeal against the modern world and its assumptions. Her knowledge of history, and of the mode of life and scale of priorities preserved in the ancient languages, enables her to draw upon

a wider range of human experience than we are now commonly aware of.  
(Canovan 1979, 10)

The context in which the conceptual pairs such as the, "public/private," "the household/the polis" and "social/political" – which are the most significant conceptual pairs analyzed by early second wave readers – appear for the first time in Classical and Hellenistic philosophy. Due to the structure of *The Human Condition*, many interpreters, such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981) and Brown (1988), see Arendt's thinking as proceeding through an Aristotelian logic in which propositions and concepts are defined and arranged in relation to their negation. I argue that this is the type of contextualizing that gives rise to interpretations of Arendt as a nostalgic thinker of the Ancient Greek polis. "The public" for example, is interpreted in relation to that which it is not, namely "the private." "The political," which according to Arendt has properties such as "the public" and "the realm of freedom," for instance, is interpreted in relation to that which it does not include, that is, "the household" and "the realm of necessity."

A section frequently referred to by early interpreters, such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981) and Brown (1988), is the second chapter of *The Human Condition*, since it is explicitly titled "The Public and the Private Realm." The public realm is here characterized among other things as "the polis," "the political realm" (HC, 28), "the realm free of necessity and free of ruling or being ruled" (HC, 32), as "the realm of speech and action" and as "the space in between" (HC, 51-53). In order to understand the key argument of the second chapter of *The Human Condition*, I will briefly elaborate on Arendt's reading, before turning to feminist interpretations of this text.

Arendt begins the chapter by demonstrating how in Ancient Greek civilizations, political freedom was institutionalized through a patriarchal participatory system of male heads of households who enjoyed full citizenship. In contrast to the public realm of freedom and equality (the polis  $\pi\sigma\lambda\acute{\alpha}\xi$ ) the realm of the household (oikos οἶκος) was regarded as a private place for necessary, life-maintaining activities (such as sheltering, consumption of food, resting and reproduction) and as a realm where the head of the household ruled according to his own will (HC, 27-32, 28 fn12). The maintenance of these households was performed by the manual labor of non-citizens, such as slaves and women. Their activity, according to Arendt, produced no tangible and lasting end products, but enabled instead the satisfaction of basic bodily needs. Individual households usually had their own means of production through farming, fishing or various forms of craftsmanship, for instance, and thus, according to Arendt's historical interpretation, economic trade was a part of the private sphere, not

a public matter (HC, 37). The public sphere was reserved for free exchange of opinions, great acts and deeds as well as various performance arts and religious ceremonies. Arendt writes:

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 "beside his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos* [free, political life]... ." (HC, 24, italics in the original)

Arendt continues that an important aspect of this ancient system was that freedom meant essentially freedom *from* some constraint. Citizens of Athens were regarded as free because they were *free from necessity*. Slaves and women, on the other hand, who were succumbed to a life in the private realm, were deprived of access to a fully human life, which for Arendt consists among other things of the possibility of establishing friendships, move freely in the common world and to be able to act and express one's opinions freely (HC, 58). For the Greeks, a crucial importance in accessing the public realm was the possibility of leaving a story behind that perpetuated the personal and mortal life of an individual.

Aristotle's characterization of man as a political animal (*zoon politikon*) and its life form as the political life (*bios politikos*) was, according to Arendt, later mistranslated by Seneca and Thomas Aquinas into Latin as *animal socialis*, the social animal (HC, 23). The consequence of this standardized translation was the loss of an understanding of the importance of the distinction not only between the public and the private, but more importantly, between the political and the social. Arendt's reluctance towards the social is thus already evident at the beginning of *The Human Condition*.

*The Human Condition* is famous for what Arendt terms here the difference between *Vita Activa*, the shared life of speech and action and *Vita Contemplativa*, the contemplative and solitary life in the realm of thought. Whereas Arendt in this text devotes herself to the investigation of the active life (*Vita Activa*) and especially the indeterminate and unpredictable nature of human action (*praxis*), in volume one of the posthumously published *The Life of the Mind*, called *Thinking*, Arendt engages herself in a historical archeology of the dichotomous distinction between thought and action in Western philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> According to Arendt, it is the experience of silent and still, meditative thinking that leads to the ancient distinction between reason (*nous*) and language (*logos*). Arendt holds that for Parmenides, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, the divine capability of the philosopher is his use of reason (*nous*), through which he can think (*noein*) and look (*theorein*) at the eternal truth and thereby become united with the imperishable cosmos and the Divine (LM I, 93, 129, 136). Arendt



Although acknowledging Arendt's expertise in ancient philosophy, precisely this knowledge of ancient thinkers becomes a highly contested topic in early, second wave feminist responses. Scholars such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981) and Brown, take issue with Arendt's striking silence on the problematic role that gender plays in Ancient Greek civilization. Arendt's practice of hierarchical demarcation in *The Human Condition*, results, according to Rich, in a rigid and sterile political ontology, which justifies the exclusion of women from the public sphere of freedom and politics. Ontologically tied to the realm of biological necessity, childbirth and hence the household and privacy, women seem to have by essence no access to politics in Arendt's philosophy. Shockingly, she observes that despite being a woman, Arendt is no friend of the women's movement and she is certainly no biographical model for feminism. Rich claims that although Arendt does not seem to be aware of it, her conceptual distinctions are heavily gendered in a way that supports a stereotypical, misogynist conception of women and their place in society.

The withholding of women from participation in the *vita activa*, the "common world,;" and the connection of this with reproductivity, is something from which she [Arendt] not so much turns her eyes, as stare straight through unseeing. This "'great work" [*The Human Condition*] is thus a kind of failure, for which masculine ideology has no name, precisely because in terms of that ideology it is successful, at the expense of truths it considers irrelevant. To read such a book by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology. (Rich 1980, 212)

To my knowledge, Adrienne Rich is among the first scholars to interpret Arendt's silence on gender as a masculine form of thinking. Arendt's silence is here equated with ignorance and even arrogance. Not only are Arendt's conceptual distinctions between "the private" and "the public" heavily gender biased, but in addition, her failure to comment on the political

explains that, for example, Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, holds this type of thinking to be a form of self-immortalization (*athanatizein*) (LM I, 136). The theoretical way of life, which for the Greeks was called *bios theoretikos* and for medieval Christians the *Vita Contemplativa* becomes – with these *deliberate* choices of notions – the highest form of human life (HC, 14–15; LM I, 137). This distinction has, according to Arendt, dramatic consequences for the realm of politics and action. Plato's utopia of the philosopher-king who, through the use of supratemporal laws rules the state as a dictator – the one who dictates to others who obey – and Hegel's conception of the Absolute Spirit as the true subject of teleological world history are dramatic examples of a philosophical theory for politics. In both cases, the "point is to eliminate the accidental" and the contingent (LM I, 139; OT, 599–601). Arendt credits Nietzsche for being brave enough to question the eternal validity of these ideologies and moral conducts and for seeing the presuppositions beneath our use of concepts.

and social injustice faced by women indicates that she in fact supports the patriarchy. Rich brings up the baffling question of Arendt's complete silence on women's role in society, *despite* the fact that Arendt was otherwise so extremely well read in ancient poetry, history and philosophy, and despite the fact that Arendt was a woman.

### *A female male supremacist*

In *The Politics of Reproduction* (1981) Mary O'Brien elaborates on Rich's critique and praises Rich's way of writing from "...the standpoint of women and women's personal and political experience" (O'Brien 1981, 91). What this means for O'Brien, is that "...the private is political. Such issues as day care, abortion, the rewards of domestic labor, family violence, the legal disadvantages of women: all of these issues emerge from the lived experience of *women's issues*" (ibid. 208). O'Brien's book is an excellent example of an early attempt to utilize the central vocabulary of the second wave movement in an academic context and in a rigorous interpretation of Arendt's political thought.

Methodologically, O'Brien situates herself as a Marxist feminist theorist inspired by the women's movement, but she also self-identifies as a midwife, whose practical work experience motivates her political writing. This standpoint is unique to O'Brien and has been unnoticed in secondary scholarship on Arendt, which mainly remembers O'Brien as the thinker who called Arendt a "female male supremacist."<sup>7</sup> However, upon closer examination of the book, it turns out that O'Brien's methodological and personal position puts her in self-declared polemy with "...such liberationists as Shulamith Firestone [and Simone de Beauvoir], who believes childbirth to be barbaric, or such female male-supremacists as Hannah Arendt, who perceives childbirth as animal" (ibid. 9). Thus, O'Brien does not hold Arendt to be solely responsible for succumbing to a male bias in her thinking, but regards this as a more general and deep theoretical trap to which feminist thinkers have also stepped.

Important here is an emphasis on the precariousness and political significance of the female body as a childbearing body. What O'Brien criticizes from a feminist standpoint, are a) arguments that hold women to be biologically closer to nature due to their childbearing

<sup>7</sup> Many feminist interpretations of Arendt mention O'Brien, but only with respect to her being *the* theorist who coined the catchphrase of Arendt as a "female male supremacist." In their readings of the history of feminist responses to Arendt, both Dietz (1995, 2002) and Honig (1995) for instance deal with O'Brien only in passing and ignore the philosophical underpinnings of her work. Hence, O'Brien is largely neglected in secondary scholarship, whereas Adrienne Rich, who wrote only a few pages on Arendt, is credited as the feminist theorist who first discovered Arendt. See also Hull (2002).

function in society and b) arguments according to which women can be liberated politically only by freeing themselves from this supposedly natural function. I will turn to O'Brien's alternative in a moment, since it interestingly resembles later psychoanalytic and sexual difference interpretations of Arendt, but I want to first elaborate on O'Brien's reading of *The Human Condition*. Like Adrienne Rich, O'Brien interprets Arendt's silence on gender as a form of masculine thinking, but unlike Rich, O'Brien justifies her argument by contextualizing Arendt among male classics in political philosophy, such as Plato and Machiavelli, whom she regards as proponents of "the idealist ideology of male supremacy" (ibid. 18).

In a chapter called "The Public and the Private Realm," O'Brien interprets *The Human Condition* through the public/private distinction and explains that "the ideology of male supremacy" rests on a dualism between man and animal as well as between "male life and the act of giving life." She continues that Arendt's support for male hegemony in politics has much in common with Plato, despite the fact that Arendt never explicitly states her indebtedness to him (ibid. 126.) The core here is a paradox faced by philosophers of the Ancient Greek polis. "The effect of the creation of a private realm was to exclude women from politics, but polity as a substitute for family is hampered by the fact that it cannot do without sexuality and procreation, and hence it cannot do without women" (ibid.). O'Brien refers to the *Symposium* in which Plato, in order to overcome this paradox, makes a distinction between "pregnancy of the body" and "pregnancy of the soul," which leads to two conceptions of "immortality": that which is achieved through children or historical fame, and that which is achieved through contemplation (ibid. 130-131). Thus Plato, contends O'Brien, invents an abstract form of male pregnancy and male birth-giving, both of which have nothing to do with nature, materiality or sexual difference. Finally, for O'Brien, Arendt's Grecophilia is highlighted in her emphasis on heroic deeds as well as in her non-biological conception of beginning. As an alternative, O'Brien promotes instead a Marxist, conscious struggle, through which:

[f]emale reproductive consciousness... transcends the isolation of women in their domestic prisons; women grasp the reality of universal consciousness, the sisterhood of which we already have primitive but profound adumbrations... . Finally, the integration of women on equal terms into the productive process is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation. Liberation also depends on the reintegration of men on equal terms into reproductive process... . In a rational human society, people will be producers in the morning, child carers in the afternoon, and critical critics in

the evening. Only then can men and women abandon a long preoccupation with sleeping together in favor of being awake together. (ibid. 208-210)

The passage I have quoted above shows that like Rich, O'Brien interprets Arendt's distinctions between the public and the private as gender biased, but unlike Rich, O'Brien does not think that this is a result of a personal, psychological flaw (a "female mind nourished on male ideology"), but sees Arendt as philosophically supporting "the normality and even the necessity of male supremacy" (ibid. 100; cf. Pateman 1983, 281-303). This commitment to male supremacy has its roots in Arendt's Platonism and in the "Arendt-style belief that for civil society to develop a participatory politics, someone must stay home and mind the kids and feed the family" while others are free to engage in speech and action (O'Brien 1981, 148). In O'Brien's interpretation, Arendt's silence on gender is primarily a symptom of a deeper masculine Grecophilia and nostalgia for the lost Ancient Greek polis (ibid. 121).

I find a distant, but intriguing parallel between O'Brien's historical critique of "the ideology of male supremacy," and later psychoanalytically as well as sexual difference oriented readings of Arendt, mainly those of Adriana Cavarero (1990/1995) and Julia Kristeva (1999/2001). Both O'Brien and Cavarero locate and emphasize a masculine Ancient Greek fear of mortality as well as a violent erasure of the ethical value of biological birth in ancient mythology. However, whereas O'Brien does not once discuss or even mention Arendt's concept of "natality" in her book, Cavarero takes this concept as the guiding point for her Arendt interpretation. Equally important is the opposing conclusion to which these two scholars come. For O'Brien, Arendt is a "female male supremacist," whereas Cavarero interprets Arendt's notion of natality as a *feminine* concept. Hence, for Cavarero, Arendt is first and foremost a female philosopher of birth and new beginnings. I will return to Cavarero in Part II of this study. For now I simply want to point out the absence of 'natality' in texts that deal with Arendt's assumed masculinity and anti-feminism as well as the feminization that this concept will undergo later on. Let me turn next to a somewhat different approach to Arendt's masculine Grecophilia.

### *Posturing boys*

In a 1981 article titled "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," Hanna Pitkin acknowledges how challenging it is to define the meaning of the terms "private" and "public" in Arendt. Coming from a Wittgensteinian background, Pitkin aims to decipher Arendt's terminology through linguistic, rather than historical, philosophical analysis. According to Pitkin then, Arendt seems to understand the terms "public" and "private" as substantives instead of adjectives, and this is why she ends up hypostasizing them into ontologically separate categories. This, contends Pitkin, generates Arendt's problematic understanding of the terms as non-relational entities, whereas if they had been understood as adjectives, they would have merely described a particular noun, such as a realm, a space or a sphere (Pitkin 1981, 328-329). Like Rich and O'Brien, Pitkin takes "The Public and the Private Realm" chapter of *The Human Condition* to represent Arendt's normative view of how politics should be institutionalized and is deeply disturbed by Arendt's alleged doom of women to the realm of the household. The by now famous and frequently recited extract below functions as a perfect textual exemplary of how Arendt as a masculine Grecophile is born:

Arendt's citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention ("Look at me! I'm the greatest!" "No, look at me!") and wanting to be reassured that they are brave, valuable and real. (No wonder they feel unreal: they have left their bodies behind in the private realm.) Though Arendt was female, there is a lot of *machismo* in her vision. Unable to face their mortality and physical vulnerability, the men she describes strive endlessly to be superhuman, and realizing that they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from the others in their anxious delusion. (Pitkin 1981, 338, italics in the original)

As can be seen from the passage I have quoted above, Pitkin, like Rich and O'Brien, frames Arendt through the themes of masculinity and nostalgia for the Ancient Greek civilization. The narration of Arendt as a masculine Grecophile is also reiterated in Wendy Brown's *Manhood and Politics* (1988), which devotes the first section of the book to the notion of politics in Aristotle and Arendt. Once again the concepts of "masculinity" and "immortality" are circulated:

Arendt's rendering of Ancient Greece is [...] the model and inspiration guiding her resuscitated political life in the modern age, a vision that involves reviving pieces of the masculinist Athenian politics she so revered

[...]. In perfect contrast to the notion that politics is about the arrangements, needs, and purposes of collective life, Hannah Arendt, claiming to speak with and for the Greeks, insists that politics is the human activity that has nothing whatsoever to do with life or need. (Brown 1998, 23)

Citing a passage<sup>8</sup> from "The Public and the Private Realm" chapter of *The Human Condition*, in which Arendt describes Plato's and Aristotle's conception of political freedom as freedom *from* the biological necessities of life, Brown claims that "Arendt depicts human beings as inherently frustrated with the biological fact of their mortality and determined to overcome this fact in some way" (Brown 1998, 24). Resembling O'Brien's critique of Plato and Arendt, Brown argues that Arendt, following the Greeks, holds the public sphere to be the space for achieving immortality through heroic deeds and collected remembrance.

Brown's text is illuminating for exploring the historical and textual tensions within feminist readings of Arendt. I want to point out an example of how different strategies of reading *The Human Condition* generate different conceptions of Arendt's relation to feminist political theorizing. Namely, upon closer examination of the original passage quoted by Brown, it becomes evident that Brown does not deal with the context of the passage, which is a larger argument about the Greek and Roman concepts of "courage." The context is important in light of other, contrasting feminist interpretations of *The Human Condition*, because Arendt's critical argument here is that in their attempt to transgress the biological necessities of life, Plato and Aristotle made the conclusion that for a truly good life to be possible, *even* the political life had to be transgressed, since even this political form of life was subject to necessity (HC, 37, cf. HC 14). Hence, both the private *and* the public realms had to be left by the philosopher who aimed to engage in the self-immortalizing and divine act of contemplation (*αθαγατιζειν athanatizein*).

Brown, on the other hand, interprets Arendt as speaking about human nature in general, whereas in light of other feminist interpretations, such as Adriana Cavarero (1990/1995) and Julia Kristeva (1999/2001), Arendt can be read as giving an account of how and why Plato and Aristotle came to think of the 'good life' in terms of a life ultimately independent from the realm of human affairs, be it that of the activities within the household, or in

<sup>8</sup> Brown cites the following passage: "The 'good life', as Aristotle called the life of the citizen, therefore was not merely better, more care-free or nobler than ordinary life, but of an altogether different quality. It was 'good' to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process." (HC 36-37)

the realm of politics. As Margaret Canovan elaborates in her 1998 preface to *The Human Condition*, Arendt's lengthy section serves the purpose of a broader argument that unfolds throughout the entire *The Human Condition*, namely that there are distinctive historical moments where we can see how the hierarchical demarcation between the active life and the contemplative life, the *Vita Activa* and the *Vita Contemplativa*, is carried out in the tradition of Western philosophy (Canovan 1998).

I argue that here the particular historical time period and second wave context of Brown's reading is evident. Brown's overall book project of overcoming masculinist politics clearly guides her reading. Brown (1988), much like O'Brien (1981), holds Arendt accountable for a masculinist political theory that has nothing to do with life and reproduction. As in the case of O'Brien's reading, I want to stress the significance of this accusation, not so much because of Arendt orthodoxy, but because the theme of life (*bios, vita*) is absolutely central to other feminist theorists dealing with Arendt's political work, most notably in the writings of Julia Kristeva (1999/2001). For now, I simply want to draw attention to the fact that an examination of Arendt's notion of "life" (*vita*), and her notion of "natality" is absent from masculine Greco-philic interpretations. This is where these readings differ dramatically from those readings that interpret Arendt as a female writer and a feminine genius. Hence, depending on which concepts and conceptual pairs are extracted for critical scrutiny, and which chapter of *The Human Condition* is taken as an entrance to Arendt's political philosophy, two opposing conceptions of Arendt's silence on gender emerges: the masculine Greco-philic and the female genius. I will examine the latter in detail in Part II of this study.

As I have argued, Rich's, O'Brien's, Pitkin's and Brown's textual evidence for their interpretations of Arendt as a masculine thinker draw from the second chapter of *The Human Condition*.<sup>9</sup> The readings are characterized by a repetitive, decontextualized citing of Arendt. Brown summarizes her book chapter on Arendt by diagnosing Arendt as an anxious, obsessive, panic-ridden theorist, with the conclusion that: "[t]here is something perilously close to pathology in Arendt's attempt to avoid touching and *contamination*, to situate action in a free space that touches absolutely nothing [...]" (ibid, 28, my emphasis). Fear of "contamination" is also used by O'Brien in characterizing Arendt's conception of freedom: "it [freedom] is possible only if man can isolate his political activities in a public realm *uncontaminated* by life processes" (O'Brien 1981, 101, my emphasis). In other words, in the framework of early second wave critics, Arendt's distinctions between

<sup>9</sup> All except one reference in *Manhood and Politics* are to the second chapter of *The Human Condition*.

the private and the public as well as between necessity and freedom appear so rigid that the realm where action takes place is sterilized of any contaminations that the biological properties of the female body might produce.<sup>10</sup>

Let me return for a moment to the notion of Arendt as a "masculine Grecophile." What I find particularly interesting in the confrontations with Arendt that I have discussed above are passages in which the discussion changes from sharp theoretical reflection of the public/private distinction to *ad hominem* arguments about Arendt's assumed gender expression, either in physical appearance, in her writing, or both. These shifts in the feminist authors' narrative tone can be partly explained by the historical setting of the texts. To be more precise, they can be seen as guided by the "standpoint," "sisterhood" and "consciousness raising" strategies of early Anglophone second wave feminist political organizing.

Another way of understanding the *ad hominem* arguments is by paying attention to the specific uses of "masculinity" in these texts. Texts written on Arendt in the late 1970s and early 1980s take momentum from certain unquestioned presumptions about gender. Early critical feminist interpreters confront Arendt's assumed masculinity due to the fact that "manhood" and "masculinity" are understood in these texts as representing hegemonic, patriarchal and chauvinist norms and ideals. Hence, the texts that I have discussed reveal not only the political landscape of this particular historical context, they also illuminate how notions of manhood and masculinity have changed over time. Since in the particular context of Hannah Arendt as a masculine, anti-feminist Grecophile, her assumed female masculinity is under scrutiny, let me elaborate on this point briefly before moving on.

The American women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s often assumed feminism to be incompatible with men and masculinity. Masculinity was largely regarded as equal to the various institutional practices of the patriarchy, most importantly dominance over women (Gardiner 2002). According to, for instance, the history of masculine norms by Sanchez et al. (2010), an American, outdated and normative, "dominant traditional

<sup>10</sup> Brown's terminology (such as "anxiety," "panic," "obsession," "pathology," "infestation") to describe Arendt's philosophy as a whole cannot go unnoticed, because in her book Brown explicitly self-identifies an author who is highly conscious of the significance of the politics of an author's language use (Brown 1988, xi-xii). In the lengthy introduction to her book she praises the women's movement for its capability to "[...] let multiple voices emerge without hushing, hierarchizing, or even typologizing..." However, this ethic does not seem to apply to her writing on Arendt. Brown dedicates several pages to justify her selection of Aristotle, Machiavelli and Weber as the main topics of her study, but spends only seven lines on Arendt, who is the only woman scholar examined in the book. Taking into consideration the fact that Arendt and Aristotle constitute the entire first section – altogether three chapters – of the book, Arendt's exclusion from the general introduction is notable.



masculinity ideology” can be characterized roughly in the following way: “[...] this ideology is dictated by four main rules: men should not be feminine; men must be respected and admired; men should never show fear; and men should seek out risk and adventure. Similarly [...] traditional gender role socialization leads men to struggle with four main factors of traditional masculinity: men should be successful, achieve power/status, and readily compete against others; men should restrict their emotions; men should restrict their affectionate behavior with other men; and men should be work/career driven” (Sanchez et al. 2010, 2; cf. Gardiner 2002; Connell 2005). In their study “The Heroism of Women and Men” (2004) Becker & Eagly associate precisely these types of masculine ideals with common conceptions of heroism. I argue that it is this type of “masculinity ideology” that Rich, O’Brien, Pitkin and Brown oppose and which they also attribute to Arendt due to her emphasis on heroic deeds. In the absence of academic masculinity studies and queer studies on masculinity, this notion of masculinity was their main paradigm for understanding women and femininity in relation to men, manhood and masculinity.

I argue that the Anglophone, early second wave, sisterhood interpretations of Arendt paradoxically end up strengthening conservative notions of masculinity, at this time of feminist discussion, because they affirm, emphasize and construct “womanhood” and “femininity” as the polar opposite of “manhood” and “masculinity.” When Arendt’s work is approached through the conceptual opposites “woman/man” and “feminine/masculine,” then all of Arendt’s conceptual distinctions suddenly seem gendered in a way that fits strictly to *either side* of the “masculine/manly” vs. the “female/womanly” dichotomy. According to Mary Dietz and Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, this was part of a deliberate reading strategy during 1970s-80s academic feminism. The novel idea of the time was to examine political concepts and historical issues as gendered, not gender-neutral (Dietz 1995; Young-Bruehl 1996).

During the eighties attempts to defend Arendt against accusations of anti-feminism leaned on this same dichotomy but from the opposite perspective. Take for example Jean Bethke Elshtain’s *Meditations on Modern Political Thought: Masculine/Feminine Themes from Luther to Arendt* (1986). In this work, Elshtain singles out the concept of “natality” as one of Arendt’s most important political concepts. However, in striking contrast to Rich, O’Brien, Pitkin and Brown, for instance, Elshtain elaborates on the biological aspects of natality, such as pregnancy and motherhood and contextualizes Arendt as a theorist wrestling with the masculine tradition of political philosophy. For Elshtain, Arendt’s single most important contribution to feminist theory is her critique of the Western political tradition that has

emphasized war and violence. Elshtain argues that through her evoking of natal imagery "Arendt locates as central a powerful, but pacific image that evokes love, not war" and which provides hope (Elshtain 1986, 109-110).

Nancy Hartsock's text from this same time period also defends Arendt's relevance for feminist theorizing. Despite regarding some aspects of Arendt's notion of the public realm as "fundamentally flawed" (Hartsock 1983, 222), she sees potential for feminism in Arendt. Like Elstain, Harstock argues that Arendt is not simply a theorist of hierarchical distinctions, but that she "[...] reads [the Greeks] and incorporates them into her own theory in ways that systematically reduce the conflictual nature of the opposition between necessity and freedom, intellect and body, and social and natural worlds" (ibid. 211). According to Harstock, these distinctions in Arendt are not oppositional, but *relational*. Thus, in Harstock's view, Arendt qualifies as a sister of feminist theorists, who pushes Greek philosophy into a direction that takes "women's experiences" much more than "men's experiences" into consideration (ibid. 253-254).

In her essay "The Feminism of Hannah Arendt," Ann M. Lane (1983) detects an interesting paradox in common receptions of Arendt: male scholars disregard Arendt for her femininity, "softness" and lack of theoretical rigorousness and seriousness. Feminist scholars such as Adrienne Rich, on the other hand, criticize her for the opposite (Lane 1983, 339). "For Rich, Arendt is a tough, 'male'-oriented thinker, oblivious to the everyday conditions of women's lives..." (ibid.). Lane's text is an example of how some feminist theorists from this time period begin to problematize the static and monolithic understanding of women as an identity category, as well as the definition of "sisterhood."

Lane calls attention to the differences within the category of women by emphasizing Arendt's Jewish background. According to Lane, critics of Arendt often ignore this detail.<sup>11</sup> "Until that fact is understood, most judgments of her will be off the mark... . Arendt's background of Jewish cultural and political experience allows us to see the relevance of her work for feminist theory and action" (ibid. 339-340). Lane draws here from Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's 1982 biography on Arendt and stresses Arendt's political self-identification as a Jew. According to Young-Bruehl, Arendt, much like Rosa Luxemburg and Rahel Varnhagen, did in fact hold a standpoint position in political activism. It just was not first and foremost *as* a woman, but instead *as* a German Jew. Nevertheless, contends Lane, she did develop political notions of solidarity and called for a community of equals, which for Lane

<sup>11</sup> Rich, O'Brien and Brown do not discuss Arendt's Jewish background when they discuss her identity as a woman.

is central also to the feminist movement. "Even if she is not a feminist, Arendt's political theory shares much with those who are, as Adrienne Rich unintentionally demonstrates." Quoting Rich at length, Lane contends that Arendt and Rich have in fact more in common than would appear at first sight (ibid. 341; see also Maslin 2013).

I will recite here a section of Lane's lengthy quotation from Rich. Adrienne Rich writes: "[Feminism] is a question of the community we are reaching for...who we envision as our hearers, or co-creators, our challengers; who will urge us to take our work further, more seriously than we had dared..." (Rich quoted in Lane 1983, 342). Lane's argument hence consists in defending Arendt against the accusations of masculinity by attempting to show a neglected parallel between standpoint feminism and Arendt's stance as a politically conscious Jew. I will return to Lane again in my more extensive discussion on the relationship between gender and Jewishness in chapter 5.3. What I want to show with respect to my present discussion is how Lane's interpretation of Arendt's notion of solidarity expands the "sisterhood" framework by emphasizing the need for understanding and solidarity among women despite – and because of – their differences.

To conclude, I find Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's retrospective summary of the time useful when attempting to understand the main arguments of early feminist critics of Arendt, as well as for shedding light on the question of why *The Human Condition* became such a contested book. I will quote Young-Bruehl at length:

Arendt's distinction between the private realm of the household and the public realm of speech and action, that is, the political realm, was lifted out of the broad range of her political theoretical concerns and targeted. Most feminists found this distinction, particularly as it was articulated in *The Human Condition*, to be a hateful legitimization of the regulation of women and the household's "separate sphere." Arendt's firm distinction seemed a kind of Victorian sexism made out of Aristotelian materials. Male citizens, Arendt seemed to be saying about the Greeks, act in public, creating and sustaining public spaces, having been given freedom to enjoy political life, to be actors, by the women and slaves and other non-citizens who performed the domestic labor and produced the offspring of the households. She also seemed to be saying uncritically, that this state of affairs – a politics

predicated on domestic slavery – was the truly human human condition.  
(Young-Bruehl 1996, 308)

In what follows next, I examine how feminist responses to Arendt's public/private distinction raise the question of the role of the body in Arendt's thinking. I use the problem of the body as a reference point for clarifying the internal tensions and polyphony within feminist scholarship on Arendt and for showing how the framing of Arendt evolves and takes new forms as the question of Arendt's silence on gender enters its third decade of interpretative debate and discussion.

## **1.2 Feminist interpretations of the enigmatic "Arendtian body"**

The question of how feminist theorists should make sense of Arendt's understanding of the body in light of her public/private distinction is a prevalent and ongoing debate. Although first brought up by early second wave theorists, who saw the neglect of the body as a sign of masculinist rationalizing, Arendt's notion of the body continues to be a topic of discussion. As has been pointed out by numerous scholars, in *The Human Condition*, for instance, Arendt rarely discusses the body or embodiment and when she does it is mostly in relation to necessary, life-sustaining bodily functions as well as to the sensation of extreme pain. To be more precise, Arendt does not seem to value the body (e.g. Rich 1979; O'Brien 1981; Pitkin 1981; Brown 1988; Honig 1995; Zerilli 1995 and 2005; Moruzzi 2000; Kristeva 1999/2001; Pulkkinen 2003; Butler 2011). Quite the contrary, Arendt writes that "[n]othing, in fact, is less common and less communicable, and therefore more shielded against the visibility and audibility of the public realm, than [...] the body" (HC, 112). "Nothing, by the same token, ejects one more radically from the world than exclusive concentration upon the body's life, a concentration forced upon man in slavery or in the extremity of unbearable pain" (ibid.).

Extreme pain, forced labor, slavery and poverty, these are hardly average everyday experiences, through which embodiment is conventionally theorized, at least not in feminist philosophy and gender theory. The following passage by Norma Claire Moruzzi is quintessential to the most common reactions to Arendt's conception of the body:

In Arendt's conception of political practice and identity, the body as such, with its immediate physical needs and attendant social demands, is to be

kept hidden in the dark shelter of the private realm, away from the public gaze. Only those who have freed themselves from the necessity of the body's demands, and from the apparent specificity of their embodied identity, are fit to enter the public world of political practice. (Moruzzi, 2000, 17; cf. Honig 1995, 139)

O'Brien, Pitkin and Brown also point out that Arendt's public/private distinction makes it seem as if the body belongs to the private realm in a sense that obscures the political significance of the body and expels it from the public realm altogether. Hence, the body seems yet another concept in Arendt's philosophy that proves her oblivion of the gendered and sexualized norms that have regulated political, philosophical and medical theorizations of the body throughout the history of Western thinking.

A majority of early second wave feminist readings of Arendt regard her theorization of the body as extremely problematic and often even offensive. I see that there is a shift in this trend that begins to take place by the 1990s. Numerous feminist theorists writing on Arendt in the 1990s and later, such as Bonnie Honig (1993, 1995), Seyla Benhabib (1993), Joan Cutting-Gray (1993), Mary Dietz (1995), Linda Zerilli (1995), Lisa Disch (1995), Amy Allen (1999), Julia Kristeva (1999/2001), Margaret Betz Hull (2002), Tuija Pulkkinen (2003) and Judith Butler (2011), for instance, find instead a perplexing and intriguing ambivalence in Arendt's treatment of the body. Furthermore, interpreters navigating Arendt's posthumously published *The Life of the Mind* through the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, defend Arendt against those who accuse her of being a despiser of the body (e.g. Hull 2002, Tambornino 2002). Finally, some scholars contend that Arendt is in fact a theorist of biopolitics (Birmingham 2006; Braun 2007; Miller 2013; Forti 2012/2015). Although the interpretations differ from each other on many levels, common to them all is a focus on the question of whether or not Arendt succumbs to a sex/gender dichotomy in her conception of the body and identity, as well as whether or not Arendt's view of performative action can be interpreted as a precursor to postmodern thinking. Is Arendt in fact a proto-feminist despite her silence on gender?

Whereas the theorists that I discussed in the previous chapter generally contend that the gap between the public and the private in Arendt's political philosophy is impossible to bridge, and that it is a theoretical flaw in her thinking, others ask: what happens if and when the body does enter the public realm and political discourse in Arendt's writings?

*Physis and nomos: is the body natural or performative?*

A by now famous letter from Arendt to the Jewish mysticism scholar, Gershom Scholem, is frequently cited in the context of attempts to shed light on Arendt's enigmatic conception of the body. The larger context of the passage I am about to quote is a debate between Arendt and Scholem over Jewish identity, responsibility and politics immediately after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Scholem basically accuses Arendt of being a self-hating Jew and pressures Arendt to define her relation to the 'Jewish people.' Arendt's reply is one of the rare textual occasions in which she attempts to give an account of her self-identity as a Jew and a woman. Hence it has also caught the attention of several feminist Arendt scholars (e.g. Zerilli 1995; Hull 2002; Pulkkinen 2003; Butler 2007 and 2012). I will quote the letter at length and then discuss the ways in which it has been interpreted in feminist secondary scholarship:

Dear Gerhard, I found your letter when I got back a week ago. [...] There are certain statements in your letter which are not open to controversy, because they are simply false. Let me deal with them first so that we can proceed to matters which merit discussion [...]. The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any other way other than I am, and never felt tempted in that direction. It would be like saying that I was a man and not a woman – that is to say, kind of insane. I know of course that there is a "Jewish problem" even on this level, but it has never been my problem – not even in my childhood. I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to disclaim or change facts of this kind. There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and was not, could not be made; for things that are *physei* and not *nomô*. To be sure, such an attitude is pre-political [...]. (Arendt to Scholem, 24 July 1963. JW, 465)

What does it mean to say that some things are "given" and not "made"? Is Arendt implying here that the body is a biological object, and that gender is a naturally given fact, and not a culturally and socially made construction? Or is Arendt implicitly making a sex/gender distinction? In her essay "The Arendtian Body" (1995) Linda Zerilli comments on Arendt's letter to Scholem and asks if identification with masculinity or disidentification with femininity should here be understood as a form of insanity? Is it so that "stable subjectivity requires an absolute clarity about one's sex/gender"? (Zerilli 1995, 170-171). Zerilli finds a strange ambivalence – even a taboo – in Arendt's thought. "Mute and shrouded in

secrecy, the Arendtian body exhibits the curious mixture of uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and sacred attributes that Freud associated with the fundamentally ambivalent structure of taboo” (Zerilli 1995, 171). Zerilli suggests that perhaps Arendt in fact grounds her conception of plurality in a naturalized sexual difference and that the reason why the body is a taboo is that if it becomes politicized, then it threatens this unquestioned, ontological ground of plurality. If this is the case, then “[t]his plurality is endangered by the embodied subject who follows an illicit desire, who dares to question what has been given (male and female), to seek a forbidden fruit” (ibid. 172).

However, Zerilli quickly rejects the hypothesis above and argues instead that Arendt is in fact gender blind and treats the body mostly as a genderless, natural object that is bound to the cyclical and biological life process that makes it mortal. In striking contrast to feminist scholars that I have discussed in the previous chapter, such as Rich, O’Brien, Pitkin and Brown, Zerilli contends that Arendt never genders the body’s relation to nature and its cycles (ibid. 172). In other words, the body, prior to entering the public space of appearances and the gaze of others, is neither feminized nor masculinized. It is, rather, an animate organism for Arendt. Because of this, claims Zerilli, Arendt is happily ignorant of the ways in which Western thinking has gendered and sexualized the body in various hegemonic ways that associate nature and cyclical processes with women’s embodiment, not men’s (ibid. 173-174; cf. Dietz 1991, 240-242 and Landes 1995, 210).

That Arendt seems to regard some facts about physical appearance, ethnicity and birth as given – and not made – puts her at odds particularly with postmodern, feminist theorizing. As Tuija Pulkkinen (2003) writes, commenting on Arendt’s problematic distinctions between the “given” and the “made”: “[t]he contours of the body are not definite facts that rule identities of gender, sexuality, race or nationality. Imaginary constructions of bodily facts and cultural constructions of identity categories through repetition are the central interest in postmodern theorizing” (Pulkkinen 2003, 222). Bonnie Honig (1995) also insists that “[a] more empowering defense against Scholem ... against any identity politics is to resist the irresistible, not by privatizing it but by unmasking the would-be irresistible, homogeneous, constative and univocal identity in question as a *performative production* [...]” (Honig 1995, 154, my emphasis).

Whereas Zerilli claims that Arendt’s take on the body has much more to do with the mortality of the body than with gender and sexuality (Zerilli 1995, 174-175), Pulkkinen argues that in fact the opposite is the case:

Gender and identity belong without a doubt to Arendt's conception of 'birth'. An individual is from birth of a gender and of an ethnic origin. Natality, a person's beginning in the world as a separate body, is decisive and founding. A person constructs herself performatively, and leaves behind a story, but she is always bound to the fact of birth. (Pulkkinen 2003, 225)

Zerilli leaves Arendt's philosophy of natality intact, despite the fact that Arendt uses the metaphor of birth and new beginnings to expose Western philosophy's obsession with death and immortality. In a chapter titled "The Arendtian Body" in *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, Margaret Betz Hull (2002) criticizes Zerilli and argues that Arendt's aim in the letter to Scholem is not to offer a theory about embodiment and gender, but simply to resist identity politics. Hull interprets the "given" or "physis" in this context to indicate the simple autobiographical fact that Arendt was born to Jewish parents and that this fact alone is not sufficient to establish a politically significant identity, which is precisely what Scholem, defending political Zionism, claims to be the case. "In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Arendt suggests as much when she identifies her Jewishness as 'a matter of course', implying that, in and of itself, her Jewish birth alone is not capable of providing anything substantially informative about her" (Hull 2002; cf. Laine 1983, 343). I'd like to quote Hull at length in order to highlight how her contextualization of the letter influences her differing interpretation of Arendt:

If anything, feminists have begun to argue that "womanhood" should be understood as Arendt understood her Jewishness – as a site for political solidarity, and not as a definable identification. Lisa Disch points out, for example, how Haraway constructs a similar argument regarding the question of the meaning of feminism in the face of the theoretical contestation over "womanness." "Woman," Haraway contends, is not so much a "natural identification" as it is "the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (Disch 1994: 294). Butler, similarly, writes, "If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive ... because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (1990: 3). Arendt enacts this same kind of understanding with her treatment of both the Jewish question and the woman question in which the notion of identity becomes a reflection more so of intentional action than of fixed definition. (Hull 2002, 149.)

Hull thus pushes Arendt towards a postmodern direction. Judith Butler (2007) also reads



the letter as an attempt to give an account of oneself, perhaps even as an attempt to politicize disidentification (cf. Butler 1993, 219). However, Butler is more critical than Hull in her interpretation of Arendt and suggests an inherent essentialism taking place in Arendt's theorizing of both gender and ethnicity as naturally given (*physei*):

Being a woman and being a Jew are both referred to as *physei* and, as such, naturally constituted rather than part of any cultural order. But Arendt's answer hardly settles the question of whether such categories are given or made; and this equivocation hardly makes her position 'insane'. Is there not a making of what is given that complicates the apparent distinction between *physei* and *nomō*? Arendt presents herself as a Jew who can and will take various political stands, whether or not they conform to anyone else's idea of what views a Jew *should* hold or what a Jew *should* be. (Butler 2007, 3 italics added)

Butler does not elaborate more on the problematic of gender in this context, but moves on to examine Arendt's relation to Jewishness and Judaism, which are the main themes of Arendt's *Jewish Writings*. Nevertheless, Hull's and Butler's take on the letter from Arendt to Scholem shed some light on the numerous and diverse interpretations that Arendt's notion of the body has provoked<sup>12</sup>.

At stake here is not just embodiment, but also the question of the relation of the body to gender, sexuality, identity and subjectivity. In light of Butler's reading, the following question could be presented: is it possible that if "Arendt presents herself as a Jew who can and will take various political stands, whether or not they conform to anyone else's idea of what views a Jew should hold or what a Jew should be" (Butler 2007, 3), then could this same be applied to Arendt's self-identification as a woman? Could we read Arendt as stating that she presents herself as a woman who can and will take various political stands, whether or not they conform to anyone else's idea of what views a woman should hold or what a woman should be like? Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1982), Ursula Ludz (1993) and Bat-Ami Bar On (2002), for instance, would answer in the affirmative. All hold that this is in fact Arendt's position regarding identity- politics:

<sup>12</sup> While finalizing and publishing this dissertation, Butler (2015) is in press. *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* contains new material on Arendt, which I have not had the possibility to examine. However, based on my previous research on Butler, I confidently assume that she will not change her position on Arendt's notion of the body, or Arendt's relation to gender as a political question.

What Arendt wanted to avoid, as a woman, was a situation in which she was distinguished from 'ordinary' women by virtue of her education, thought 'strange and exciting', entertainingly different, a unique personality. What she wanted for women and from women was attention paid to questions about political and legal discrimination, attention broad enough to relate women's political and legal problems to *all* groups denied equality. (Young-Buehl 1982, 273, italics added; cf Ludz 1993, 354-355; Bar On 2002, 59-83)

Arendt's commitment to a way of thinking common to the first wave of the women's movement can be detected in Young-Buehl's characterization above. Likewise, in "The 'Anti-Feminism' of Hannah Arendt" Maria Markus (1989) sees an affinity between Arendt's and Rosa Luxemburg's attitude towards the women's movement, which I think illuminates the tension between Arendt and second wave feminism at large:

The parallel between Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt extends to their common understanding of the so-called 'women's problem' [a first wave framing] and its solution. Neither of them, and certainly not Arendt, expected these very real problems to be solved automatically as the result of other socio-political transformations. They shared the conviction that women's issues cannot and should not be divorced from larger concerns and political struggles, instead insisting that they be pursued jointly with other political goals in coordinated political activities. [...] Arendt feared that should women as a group enter the sphere of politics concerned primarily with their own 'women's problems', they would face up neither to the plurality of opinions and judgments among women themselves nor the plurality of opinions confronting them. (Markus 1989, 125, 127)

Yet, I propose that there is more to "the body as *physis*" than Arendt's negative characterizations in *The Human Condition* or her brief remarks in the letter to Scholem. Whatever Arendt's personal position was regarding her gender identity and Jewish identity, the theme of the body and embodiment remain perplexing, because upon closer examination this theme is in fact scattered throughout her oeuvre. Let me briefly elaborate on my claim before continuing. I find two major ways in which "the body" figures in Arendt's political writings. On one hand, "the body" functions as a cluster concept that signifies various characteristics and elements associated with organic life. On the other hand, it signifies the

unique and distinct, animate and phenomenologically understood, lived body of a person or an animal (LM I; Honkasalo 2006, 69-74). Thus, there are at least two different ways of understanding what Arendt means by "the body" entering the political and this complicates the role of *the* body in the public / private framework. Firstly, metaphors related to the body can signify the slippage of biological terminology into political discourse, such as in the case of the use of concepts like "body politic," "natural progress of history," and "necessity of violence" (OT, 180, 460-479; OR, ch. II; OV, 74-75; Musolff, 2010). Secondly, Arendt speaks about the body entering the political through the free, conscientious speech and action of an individual (HC ch. V; LM I, 11, 19-20, 46).

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution* are perfect examples of texts in which the body is discussed in connection with the merging of biological concepts into political language. Arendt writes that "[t]he most powerful necessity of which we are aware in self-introspection is the life process which permeates our bodies and keeps them in a constant state of a change whose movements are automatic, independent of our own activities, and irresistible – i.e., of an overwhelming urgency" (OR, 53). According to Arendt, early modern social contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Rousseau in particular, imposed this conception of the human body onto the entire society, as if society consisted of a gigantic body commanded by a sovereign head and will (ibid. 54). Just like the human body stays alive through certain necessary, homeostatic and automatic functions, so does the nation stay alive through a natural and necessary composition and order. This argument is not unique to Arendt. However, Arendt draws the implication that the concept of "necessity" is thus carried over from its original use in the study of organic life into political language, and hence the culturally and socially constructed political order is mistaken for a naturally based order. For instance, the "state of nature," in which everyone is at war against each other is explained by Hobbes as a natural characteristic of man as a species. He thus bases his conception of man on a pre-political, pre-legal, natural foundation (OT, 139-143). Arendt argues that hence, when the abstract idea of "*the* body in general" enters political discourse, it obscures what is essential to politics, namely "plurality," "spontaneity" and "freedom in distinction from necessity."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hobbes radical task in the *Leviathan* is to remove the medieval conception of political sovereignty as God, and establish a political philosophy of the sovereign people as contracting, political agents. The *Leviathan* famously contains a discussion of "the state of nature" in which everyone is at war against each other. This state is pre-legal and pre-moral and the only motivation that guides human action in the state of nature is fear of death, in other words, self-preservation at any cost (Hobbes 2008, I:XIII §8-9, §13, 84-86). Since fear of death and the desire of self-preservation are something that Hobbes regards as an essential characteristics of *all* human beings in *all* times, he contends that fear and the will to subjugate – rather than the quest for virtuous life for instance – function as the ground for a new kind of political philosophy. For Arendt, who was deeply influenced by Montesquieu's separation of powers, the problem

In a similar vein, due to her critique of Rousseau, Arendt famously condemns the French Revolution for being a revolution driven into civil war and violent chaos. Following Rousseau, the French revolutionaries saw both power and law as emerging from the General Will, which is an expression of the people as a unified, homogenous whole. Arendt characterizes this conception of "people" by phrases such as the "multitude of the poor" and the "miserable," who "driven by their bodies," erupted onto the "scene of politics," and who through their focus on the satisfaction of mere material needs and abundance halted the opportunity to found political freedom in institutions enacted by the legislative body which the people's power constitutes. Thus, according to her "[...] freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself" (ibid, 53-55).

In the context of the French Revolution, Arendt discusses the body mostly in connection to poverty. Poverty, writes Arendt, is the situation *par excellence* to describe the vulnerability and restraint of embodiment. A person living in extreme poverty is driven by the urge to satisfy the most basic, life-sustaining activities, such as staying warm, dry, hydrated and fed. Poverty is dehumanizing, and "[...] abject, because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is under the absolute dictate of necessity as all men know it from their most intimate experience outside all speculations" (ibid. 54). For Arendt, the condition of being absolutely dictated by the body is pre-political, perhaps even anti-political, because a person forced into this condition has to struggle for the most basic needs, thus often not enjoying full political recognition and rights. According to her, no human being should have to succumb to this inhuman condition, because being treated as a human means for Arendt being regarded as a member of a political community of equals (OT, 298, 301). We thus get to the heart of the meaning of the body as *physis*.

Referring to Arendt's *On Revolution*, Bonnie Honig claims that "...[the] body is...a master signifier of necessity, irresistibility, imitability, and the determination of pure process." According to Honig, "[t]here can be no speech, no action, unless and until the violently pressing, indeed irresistible, needs of the body are satisfied" (Honig 1995, 138-139). In her examination of

with the *Leviathan* is that Hobbes claims this structure to guarantee peace, but in fact there is no way to control that the sovereign does not become a tyrant and legislate and execute despotic laws. The following statement by Montesquieu could just as well be Arendt's: "When legislative power is united with executive power in a single person or in a body of the magistracy, there is no liberty, because one can fear that the same monarch or senate that makes tyrannical laws will execute them tyrannically" (Montesquieu 1989, II: 11 §6, 157; cf. Hobbes 2008, I: XVII §13-14, 114). Compare this to Arendt in *On Revolution*: "In this respect, the great and, in the long run, perhaps the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same" (OR, 153).

the body in Arendt, Honig makes an analytical distinction between what she calls the "single, univocal body" and "the multiple, acting self." The private is here interpreted as singularity, whereas the public is a channel for access to plurality and equal treatment by law. Taking into account both the early, second wave critiques of Arendt, as well as the more recent elaborations of the body in Arendt, it is remarkable the extent to which Honig is sympathetic to Arendt's negative characterization of the body:

[...] bodies are [...] despotic, irresistible, univocal and uncreative. [They] are disruptive, always threatening to rise, or burst, onto the scene and close the spaces of politics. Because of this ever-present threat, we must be vigilant and guard the public realm, the space of performativity, against the intrusion of the bodily and constative compulsion. (Honig 1995, 141)

What may seem like a strange condemnation of the body by Honig is in fact a deeper, political point. For Honig, politicizing embodied differences can in some cases mean a dangerous reduction of a person to, for instance, their race, gender or sexuality. This is why she wants to protect the public realm from "the intrusion" of the *physis*. In Honig's reading, so called identity-categories like "gender," "race," "ethnicity" or "nationality" are not given but performative. In Arendt's own terminology in *The Human Condition*, the "what" of someone, is according to Honig an element that should be protected from politicizing, whereas "who" someone is, is an act of performativity. Honig argues that we need to take seriously both Arendt's critique of identity politics, as well as her warning of the racialization of certain bodies, in order to decipher her conception of the body. In Arendt's own terminology, this means that the potential dangers in the slippage of biological discourse into politics must be taken seriously.

I'd like to draw attention to the fact that Honig's interpretation draws heavily from the fifth – not the second chapter – of *The Human Condition*. In chapter V, the public sphere is characterized as "the space of appearance," where, "...in acting and speaking, men show *who* they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (HC, 179). Arendt distinguishes conceptually our "whoness" from *what* we are. In a later text, Arendt translates the "who" as the Latin word *persona* (person), which originates from the theatrical meaning *per sonare*, "sounding through the mask." Arendt elaborates: "the advantage of adopting the notion of *persona* for my considerations lies in the fact that the masks or roles which the world assigns us...are not a permanent fixture annexed to our inner self" (RJ, 13).

Honig translates Arendt's notions of action and "the who" as implying a kind of postmodern performativity regarding identity and the body, and it is precisely here that Honig sees Arendt's potential for feminism:

Arendt's politics is a promising model for those brands of feminism that seek to contest (performatively or agonistically) the prevailing construction of sex and gender into binary and binding categories of identity, as well as the prevailing binary division of political space into a public and private realm. (Honig 1995, 136-137)

I will return to postmodern elaborations on Arendt's theory of action in detail further on (chapter 5). In the context of my present discussion, I have brought up Honig's interpretation as an example of an alternative way of framing *The Human Condition*, namely, as a proto-feminist work. By contrasting Honig's interpretation of the "Arendtian body" with the readings of critics I have discussed above, it becomes evident that a new way of framing Arendt's silence on gender begins to take place as the postmodern research paradigm enters feminist, academic scholarship. This paradigm shift expands the interpretative freedom and creativity of authors exploring Arendt's work. What Arendt says or leaves unsaid about "women" (and "men") becomes less interesting than asking what can be done within feminist theorizing with Arendt's concepts.

I will conclude this chapter by giving one more example of how Arendt's notion of the body as *physis* has been understood. I argue that this is by far the most marginal, albeit intriguing, trend of reading Arendt as a precursor to biopolitics. Arendt now emerges as a useful theorist in the study of the complex relation between human rights and women's rights. In order to clarify the main argument of these readings, I want first to briefly elaborate on a section from the key text that feminist writers on biopolitics draw from, namely *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

### ***Framing the body as biopolitical***

In a chapter called "Total Domination" towards the end of *The Origins*, Arendt describes a detailed technique of prolonged death, which she calls the "preparation of living corpses." According to Arendt, the most horrendous accomplishment of the Nazi SS was the "[...] eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing [...]" (OT, 438). The outcome is the following: "the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are

more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died..." (OT, 443).

After systematic and chronic psychological and physical torture at the hands of the SS, finally nothing "[...] remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react" (OT, 455). The body in this context is described as "inanimate," a "living corpse," and a "bundle of reactions." It is "cut off" from the outside world, in a similar way as in *The Human Condition* the body is "ejected radically" from the world in the experience of slavery and extreme pain. The physically and psychologically destroyed "living corpse" is dehumanized to the extent that the person is oblivious and indifferent to any kind of markers of personal identity, such as a name, national background or gender.<sup>14</sup>

I argue that the fact that the body can potentially be made into a "mere thing" (*physis*), a "what" and even "a living corpse," with automatic, reflex-like reactions, informs all of Arendt's discussions of the body up until *Crises of Republic* (1972). This fact both fascinates and terrifies her, as can be seen from the rich use of metaphors in the sections that I quoted above. Without using the term "biopolitics," Arendt in fact depicts how the concentration camps functioned as laboratories for biopolitical experimenting. However, to my knowledge, Ruth A. Miller (2013) is one of the few feminist interpreters of Arendt who notices that Arendt's general, interpretative and analytical perspective on the body is informed by her experience of totalitarianism, the extermination camps and the body of the incarnated.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Primo Levi calls this phenomenon "the demolition of man" and describes this experience in his book *If This is a Man*: "Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains." (Levi 2010, 26-27; cf. Agamben 2002). The Lager [camp] is "a gigantic biological and social experiment" (Levi, 1996: 87).

<sup>15</sup> In "Violence and the Biopolitics of Modernity," Johanna Oksala (2010) comments on Arendt's distinction between the private and the public as well as the social and the political by stating the following: "While alerting us to the dangerous merging of life and politics in Modernity she [Arendt] would nevertheless insist that biopolitics must remain an oxymoron, the merging of two ontologically incompatible concepts" (Oksala 2010, 28). Peg Birmingham (2006), on the other hand, sees Arendt in a different light: "Arendt's analysis of the racialization of the Jewish people is an extended examination of the ways in which biopolitics is at work in the modern political space. I would also argue that her critique of the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie – liberation of the economic in the political – can be read as biopolitics" (Birmingham 2006, 148 n12). Katrin Braun (2007) and Andre Duarte (2005) also contend that although Arendt did not

Miller (2013) proposes that Arendt, much like Elaine Scarry (who in fact draws on Arendt in her 1985 pioneering study *The Body in Pain*), can be used for theorizing how pain, torture, illness, poverty and slavery are philosophically significant and revealing, because they serve as limit cases of human experience. By pushing embodied experience to its limit, these examples shed light on the construction of experiences regarded as normal and hence overlooked. For Miller, agency and citizenship, for instance, is in Western political theorizing usually theorized through a historical framework concerning male, adult, abled, morally fit persons. In *The Limits of Bodily Integrity* (2013) Miller writes that on the other hand, "[b]oth Scarry and Arendt are describing a biopolitical reality in which physical passivity is directly proportional to political activity" (Miller 2013, 127). What this means is that:

If, however, we assume that the predominant model of sovereignty has been biopolitical, that the fundamental sovereign right has been the right to make live and let die – if we place sexual and reproductive legislation at the center of citizenship formation, and understand political activity as biological passivity – then we need to rethink this analysis [...]. Rather than understanding men as the norm and women as artificial facsimiles of men, it makes far more sense in a biopolitical framework to understand women as the norm and men as their copies. It is the womb that has become the predominant biopolitical space, it is women's bodily borders that have been displaced onto national ones, [and] it is thus the citizen with the womb who has become the political neutral. (Miller 2013, 149)

I want to point out that Miller draws here from a thesis originally made by Giorgio Agamben, according to whom Arendt's philosophy reveals the modern, biopolitical reduction of certain persons to their mere *physis/zoë*, or what Agamben calls *bare life* (Agamben 1998). Agamben's philosophy of biopolitics is built on an Arendtian reading of Michel Foucault's<sup>16</sup> lectures on biopower. In contrast to Foucault, Agamben claims that sovereign power is not a feature exclusive to the modern nation state. Quite the contrary, sovereign power in the

use the term "biopolitics" in her writings, her work, particularly her early essays rejecting political Zionism, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as well as her critique of the social mass bureaucracy in *The Human Condition*, contain numerous, sophisticated analyses that parallel contemporary understandings of biopolitics, most notably Foucault's analysis of modernity and administrative governmentality. See also Forti 2012/2015.

<sup>16</sup> In his lectures at Collège de France 1977-1978 published as *Security, Territory, Population (Sécurité, territoire et population)*, Foucault expands his investigation of the historical era of modern power. He is now concerned with an even more complex kind of power, which he calls "governmentality" (Foucault 2007, 115). This form of power differs from disciplinary power in the sense that instead of simply disciplining individuals, it also aims at controlling entire



form of the state of exception is the *sine qua non* for the appearance of biopolitics. Hence, for Agamben, sovereignty is inseparable from biopolitics (Agamben 1998, 6-7; Kalyvas 2005). Agamben also holds that Foucault fails to theorize the concentration camp as the ultimate site of biopower (ibid, 4, 88-89). The camp in other words represents for Agamben the site at which exception has become the rule and sovereign power is absolute. In his critique of Foucault, Agamben draws from Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Miller departs from Agamben by transforming Agamben's notion of "bare life" into gendered, bare life. By theorizing the womb as the biopolitical site *par excellence*, Miller argues that women's bodies are the best example of how biopower operates. This claim is intriguing in the light of my study because here Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* opens paths for rethinking and critiquing traditional notions of the sovereign state and citizenship, all of which being originally premised on the exclusion of women. The result of Miller's analysis is that Agamben's notion of "bare life" is an abstraction that fails to take into account politically significant, racialized and gendered meanings associated with the biopolitical regulation of "life" as well as specific forms of resistance that arise from such forms of life (cf. Miller 2013; Spivak & Butler 2007). Through a reading of Arendt as a critic of biopolitics, Miller shows that "bare life" is never as "bare" as Agamben claims it to be.

By way of conclusion, I will briefly add an interpretational challenge to both Arendt readings above. Namely, the relationship between state power, gender and embodiment turns out to be even more complex in light of Kendall Thomas's (2006) reading, which theorizes the paradox of transgender embodiment and human rights through Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. To quote Thomas:

To adapt an image from Hannah Arendt's critique of human rights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we are dealing here with a political regime under which a person who violates the rules of the (normative) gender contract is considered to have "lost the very qualities which make it possible for

populations by monitoring every possible level of life, such as birth, death, reproduction, housing, and so on. In other words, state power intrudes into every aspect of life, but not merely in the form of the sovereign's power over life and death, but instead as a monitoring power. This is what Foucault calls *biopower*. The methodological parallel to *Discipline and Punish* is obvious. Foucault asks: "can we talk of something like a 'governmentality' that would be to the state what techniques of segregation were to psychiatry, what techniques of discipline were to the penal system, and what biopolitics was to medical institutions?" (Foucault 2007, 120). Compare this to Arendt: "[S]ociety is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence *for the sake of life and nothing else* assumes public significance and where the activities concerned with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public" (HC, 46, my italics).

other people to treat him [*sic*] as a fellow [human being].” The transgender person is thus caught in an impossible double bind. Recognizing the need to become more fully human, the transgender person realizes she or he must break free of the constricting bonds of ”normal” gender. However, in renouncing normative gender, she or he must forfeit any right to recognition and respect as a ”normal” human being. Put another way, we might say that the transgender person must either choose, or risk being forced to ”stand on the side” of the inhuman. (Thomas 2006, 317)

Although Thomas mentions Arendt only in passing and does not draw from Agamben, the ”impossible double bind” of inclusion and exclusion that he describes is nevertheless a kin to the condition of ”bare life” theorized by Agamben and Miller. However, whereas Agamben’s notion of ”bare life” is genderless and Miller’s notion is gendered as female, Thomas’s elaboration of Arendt points out a form of life that fits oddly with both genderless (Agamben) and gendered (Miller) categories. According to Thomas, transgender citizenship is a paradox of terms, since obtaining full legal recognition entails giving up the right to bodily integrity, which is precisely what full transgender legal recognition aims for in the first place. The anatomo-political and biopolitical regulation of the body of the transgender person operates by making intelligible and fully human only those forms of gendered life that fit to *either* the male *or* the female category, not both. Thus, the body of the transgender person is not truly political, but nor is it merely biological. It is politicized and policed, but included in the political only through its exclusion.

In the discussion above, I have argued that secondary scholarship on Arendt’s silence on gender frequently takes issue with the public/private distinction as well as Arendt’s enigmatic conception of the body. In my discussion, I have proposed that the question of how Arendt’s writings on the body should be understood challenges the framings of Arendt as an anti-feminist, because feminist theorists have not reached agreement on whether the body in Arendt’s philosophy is natural, performative or biopolitical (or all of the above) and whether the body falls into the private sphere or the public sphere (or both). Since there are numerous, internally contradictory ways of interpreting Arendt on this matter, the body illuminates the polyphony of feminist Arendt scholarship. The same question turns out to have several different answers, depending on the angle of framing. In what follows, I will examine three different readings of Arendt’s critique of the social in order to strengthen my argument. As with the body, also feminist responses to ”the social” in Arendt can only be understood through an examination of multiple framings of Arendt’s thinking. Since both the early second wave theorists as well as later feminist framings argue in different ways

that "gender" cannot be examined apart from the social and economic oppression faced by women, "the social" is an important operational concept in feminist responses to Arendt's silence on gender. Yet, the implications that various theorists draw from Arendt's use of this concept vary greatly, from conceiving Arendt as an anti-democrat to theorizing her as a precursor to feminist, radical democratic projects.

## **2. Women and the "social question"**

In the following, I examine in detail three major feminist interpretations of Arendt's notion of the social, as this concept is importantly linked to the public/private distinction. As is the case with the public/private distinction, as well as the body, the social is also a concept that divides interpreters into various camps with respect to the question of whether Arendt is an anti-feminist or a proto-feminist. By reading the interpretations of Hanna Pitkin (1998), Seyla Benhabib (1996/2003) and Linda Zerilli (2005) parallel to each other, I want to draw attention to the historical development of feminist scholarship on Arendt: whereas in 1998 Pitkin still circulates concepts and vocabulary from the "masculine Grecophile" interpretations in her take on the social as a "Blob," Benhabib's interpretation from this same time period adds instead new layers not only to interpretations of Arendt's silence on gender but also to feminist framings themselves. Hence, by examining these three feminist interpretations of Arendt, I aim to show that by the mid-nineties and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, a meta-discussion concerning feminist framings of Arendt begins to emerge. Not only do Benhabib and Zerilli offer their unique readings of Arendt, they also comment on the different waves within the history of feminist political organizing and suggest new ways for formulating feminist public spaces through a reading of Arendt. Arendt's philosophy now becomes a tool with which key ideas and concepts of the second wave movement are evaluated, problematized and reframed.

### **2.1 Arendt as an anti-democrat and anti-feminist**

Arendt's critique of the social has often been read as running against such fundamental democratic principles as equal and just social distribution (e.g. Wolin 1983). To borrow Dana Villa's capturing phrasing of the problem at stake, for Arendt, the social "[...] is a kind of bastard hybrid of public and private. It is a realm that reduces the public sphere to bureaucratic administration of the 'national household' [...]" (Villa 2008, 341). Linda Zerilli also describes the social in Arendt as "[...] a kind of enlarged 'housekeeping,' whereby the public/private distinction is dissolved and citizens are situated in a relatively passive relation to the bureaucratic apparatus of the welfare state, which becomes the sole addressee of political claims [...]" (Zerilli 2005, 2-3).

For Hanna Pitkin, not only is Arendt's distinction between the public and the private extremely problematic for any kind of formulation of feminist politics, but worse, add

to this Arendt's conceptualization of the social, and we have a theory of politics that is so elitist, obscure and counterproductive that "[...] one cannot even make sense of politics itself; even for those admitted to its benefits [...]" (Pitkin 1981, 336; cf. Pitkin 1998, 1-5). What Pitkin is particularly troubled with is that by excluding social questions from the political index, Arendt polices the content of what counts as a properly political agenda. Thus Pitkin corrects Arendt by stating that:

What we need here is not separation but linkage. It is the connection that matters, the transformation of social conditions into political issues, of need and interest into principle and justice. Far from excluding the social question as unworthy of political life, we need to make it political in order to render it amenable to human action and direction. (Pitkin 1981, 346)

Pitkin argues that Arendt ends up developing a normative critique of democracy, which blames "the rise of the social" for various failures in modern liberal democracies. I argue that Pitkin's reading on this ground is influenced by Sheldon Wolin's pioneering interpretation of Arendt as a philosopher whose elitist ideas are incompatible with democratic ideals (Wolin 1983).<sup>17</sup>

### ***The attack from outer space***

Pitkin's book-length study *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (1998), is one of the most known and most cited political commentaries on Arendt's concept of the social.

In her book, Pitkin compares Arendt's concept of the social to a 1950s science fiction horror movie about an extraterrestrial, jellylike monster "the Blob" that slowly takes over humanity and destroys it (Pitkin 1998, 4). Drawing from the work of Susan Sontag, among others, Pitkin contextualizes *The Human Condition* by disclosing a trend of disaster entertainment appearing in the American society during the 1950s. In these films the world is depicted as being threatened by some abstract, outer enemy. According to Pitkin, the trend reflects the anxiety that people experienced due to the possibility of total nuclear war

<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Wolin taught political theory at University of California Berkeley from 1954 to 1970 and at Princeton University from 1973 to 1987. His major work in the history of political philosophy, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (1960/2004) had a great impact on both his colleagues and graduate students, including Wendy Brown, Hanna Pitkin and Dana R. Villa. In 1983, Wolin published an article "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" in which he argues that Arendt's rigid distinctions lead to an elitist notion of politics, which is incompatible with basic ideals of democracy (Wolin 1983). For a critique of Wolin's reading, see Villa (2008, ch. 9).

during the Cold War era. Arendt, who in Pitkin's view hypostasizes the adjective "social" into a noun, ends up theorizing the social as if it was something alive, abstract, external and threatening, just like the monsters in the sci-fi film industry of the 1950s (ibid. 4-5, 10-16, 226).

What is particularly problematic in Arendt's framework according to Pitkin's interpretation is that Arendt abstracts and demonizes the social and then blames various social groups for the rise of imperialism and totalitarianism. "Before there was a mass, there was a mob, the colonial bureaucrat and the secret agent, the racist Boer, the early anti-Semite" (ibid. 85). Pitkin points out that because Arendt's concept of the social is so abstract, and yet somehow responsible for fundamental failures in democracy, it becomes hard to theorize agency and responsibility in this framework. For Pitkin, this is a perplexing paradox to find in Arendt's political philosophy, because she herself puts so much emphasis on individuality, action and freedom.

What then, in Pitkin's view, are the particular consequences of this anti-democratic framework for feminist political theorizing? According to Pitkin, it is crucial to ask whether or not Arendt's framework and sharp distinctions between "the private" and "the public" as well as "the political" and "the social," entail the exclusion of women from the public sphere and thus from politics altogether? By setting up her inquiry in this manner, Pitkin develops further her argumentative position in the 1981 article "Justice: On Relating the Public and the Private," which I discussed in chapter 1.1.

In a chapter titled "Abstraction, Authority, and Gender," Pitkin sets as her task to unravel the deep structures of what she takes to be the reason behind Arendt's demonization of the social. Pitkin makes an original argument according to which Arendt's dislike of the social is in fact importantly related to her neglect of the question of gender. Pitkin argues: "[...] therefore, we shall take up the psychological and gender-related concerns that Arendt sought so strenuously to *banish* from her work [...]" (Pitkin 1998, 147, my emphasis). Pitkin thus highlights Arendt's silence on gender and takes it as a starting point for her inquiry into the motivation behind Arendt's critique of the social.

As for all the early second wave theorists that I have discussed in the previous chapter, Pitkin's interpretation in this section relies on a particular reading of *The Human Condition*. According to Pitkin, "[t]he (modern) social appears in chapter 2 [of *The Human Condition*] as an evil third term to the dyad of public and private, blurring their distinction and ultimately destroying both [...]" (ibid 148). According to Pitkin, *The Human Condition*

is thus based on a normative dichotomy between action and the social, of which the prior is good and the latter constitutes "the evil threat" to action (ibid.). What then follows in Pitkin's analysis is an attempt to theorize the relationship between Arendt's critique of the social and her systematic neglect of questions relating to gender through a biographical interpretation of a handful of events in Arendt's personal life, such as the death of her father, her affair with Martin Heidegger, as well as her conflictual relationship with her mother, Martha Arendt (ibid. 149-152).

I argue that both the strategic use of psychologism as well as gynocentricism, common to early second wave interpretations of Arendt, drive Pitkin's reading. As she explains: "Arendt's social is not merely feminine but specifically maternal. It is not, to be sure, a nurturing, protective, gentle mother [...] but an evil, dominating, destructive matriarch [...]" (Pitkin 1998, 171). The symbolic meaning of 'the Blob' represents thus a nightmarish, narcissistic mother who crosses all boundaries and engulfs her children back into one substance, herself. According to Pitkin, femininity and feminine concepts such as the 'social,' the 'private' and the 'household' represent for Arendt a threat of loss of individuality, whereas masculine concepts, such as the "public," "politics" and "action" represents the possibility to express one's unique distinctness. Arendt's idealization of masculinity thus makes her conception of politics, if not incompatible with feminism, then at least a highly challenging enterprise to decipher.

I want to highlight that Pitkin participates in framing Arendt as an anti-feminist and also an anti-democrat by molding and amplifying early second wave contexts of interpretation. *The Attack of the Blob* thus functions as site for re-signification, reiteration and circulation of vocabulary launched by Rich, O'Brien and Brown for instance.

Pitkin's axis of interpretation draws from one major text by Arendt (*The Human Condition*), as well as historical details, biography, psychoanalysis and political philosophy. What begins as a rigorous examination of the concept of 'the social' in Arendt, emerges into a text about how Arendt's problematic theoretical relation to questions regarding gender, the women's movement and feminism is in fact a problem regarding the author's personal psyche.

In a book review of *The Attack of the Blob* from 1999, Seyla Benhabib takes issue with Pitkin's psychologism. Benhabib argues that although Pitkin is insightful about the fact that there seems to be a perplexing relationship between Arendt's silence on gender and her critique of the social, her account fails to respond to the more theoretical underpinnings

and questions in this relationship. What Pitkin misses is the historical context against which Arendt examines the question of the social, namely modernity:

[W]hy resort to a psychoanalytic subtext in order to make the straightforward argument that Arendt's concept of the social is confused and ambiguous? Even as an historical-institutional account of the emergence of the modern commodity market, the modern state apparatus, and modern civil society, Arendt's theory of the "rise of the social" lacks sociological precision. Cloaking it with yet another layer of meaning, now drawn from depth psychology, hardly helps. Arendt's political thought, like her life, needs to be understood and assessed in its own right. (Benhabib 1999)

The rejection of Pitkin's analytic framework in Benhabib's book review illustrates how academic feminism had by the late 1990s become a highly multidimensional and internally critical discipline. In Benhabib's view, Pitkin's methodology needed to be updated. Let me clarify this point. What in the 1970s and the 1980s would still have been considered a political reading strategy is according to Benhabib's book review an obscure form of "depth psychology."

According to my review of major feminist interpretations of Arendt's philosophy from the 1970s on, the view according to which Arendt is a nostalgic Grecophile, and hostile to feminist politics, remains predominant up until the mid 1990s (cf. Ludz 1993, 350; Hull 2002, 143). *The Attack of the Blob* (1998) is one of the last representatives of the anti-feminist reading paradigm.

In *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Seyla Benhabib (1996) acknowledges the interpretative perplexities that will face any reader of Arendt and offers a new angle to the debate on Arendt's silence on gender. Operating with the notions of "modernity" and "the modern," Benhabib argues:

There is by now [in 1996] a standard and widespread reading of Hannah Arendt's work. Placing *The Human Condition* as the definite expression of Arendt's political philosophy at the center, this view argues that Hannah Arendt is a philosopher of nostalgia, an antimodernist lover of the Greek polis. It is said that she views modernity simply as a decline of "the public sphere" of politics. Very few of her categories, indeed if any at all, are relevant for understanding the contemporary world, it is argued. Perhaps her



concepts of action, judgment, and the public sphere contain a few insights for democratic politics, these critics contend, but beyond this, not much can be gained from Hannah Arendt. (Benhabib 1996/2003, xxv)

What Benhabib then offers as an alternative route is to decentralize the hegemonic position of *The Human Condition* in Arendt scholarship (ibid. xxv, 118). Benhabib, like Ann M. Laine before her, recommends scholars to familiarize themselves with other works, such as *Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. According to Benhabib, this suggestion is important for understanding the broader motivational context in which Arendt wrote all her works, namely the rise of anti-Semitism and totalitarianism. Distinctions, such as "the public" and "the private" should according to Benhabib thus be read in light of totalitarian bureaucracy, not only with respect to the history of Ancient Greek civilization.

Benhabib is by no means alone in her critique of the "Grecophile" interpretations. Joanne Cutting-Gray (1993), Mary Dietz (1994, 1995) and Mary Hawkesworth (1996), among others, also take issue with interpretations that characterize Arendt as a conservative, nostalgic Grecophile. Hawkesworth comments directly on the masculinist Grecophile readings in the following way:

*The Human Condition* is not an exercise in Graecophilia. Nor is it an endorsement of a hierarchical class order which imposes the obligations of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* on subordinate classes of people while reserving the possibility of politics for a male elite. (Hawkesworth 1996, 165)

As is evident, Benhabib's, Dietz's and Hawkesworth's theses stand in striking opposition to Adrienne Rich, Mary O'Brien, Wendy Brown and Hanna Pitkin, for instance, whose critiques of Arendt I have discussed above. Yet, all these thinkers pivot their arguments on the same text, namely *The Human Condition*. Thus, Benhabib's suggestion to move away from *The Human Condition* leaves intact the intriguing question of why the standard reading of Arendt changes so dramatically in just a decade of feminist scholarship.

In contrast to Pitkin, Benhabib's interpretative method consists in examining how various authors have reacted and responded to the political and moral challenges posed by modernity. In other words, instead of asking: "What is the social in Arendt?" she examines how modernity appears in the texts of political philosophers, such as Arendt, Foucault and Jürgen Habermas, and what kind of conceptual strategies they have used in order to

understand modernity.

Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* highlights that for Arendt modernity marks a historical era characterized by the turmoil of rapid changes, technological innovations and political revolutions. At the same time, it is an era of continuous search for new foundations to replace old doctrines and traditions, such as Christian religious authority, Aristotelian natural sciences and the geocentric conception of the universe (Benhabib 1996; HC). Benhabib argues that for Arendt, in the history of political philosophy, modernity appears as a void that takes the place of power. As the authority of religion and tradition is put into question or refuted and the old ground for moral and political philosophy disappears, numerous attempts to occupy this space emerge. Candidates are as diverse as the totalitarian movements of Nazism and Stalinism, revolutionary movements such as Marxism and critical theory as well as economically oriented processes such as capitalism (OT).

It is against this complex history of modernity that Benhabib examines Arendt's relationship to feminism. How then does Benhabib herself account for the relationship between Arendt's silence on gender and her critique of the social? I will next provide an examination of Benhabib's turn away from an exclusive focus on *The Human Condition* and discuss how her reading brings forth yet another, novel interpretation of the relationship between the "public" and "the private," as well as "the social" and "the political," this time with an affirmative conception of the relevance of Arendt's work for feminist political theorizing. My discussion on Benhabib, followed by Zerilli, shows how the feminist tradition of Arendt scholarship evolves by the 1990s into a critical reflection of this tradition itself.

## **2.2 The promise of Arendt's notion of "the social" for a feminist radical democratic critique**

Although Pitkin's sci-fi analogy takes the critique of Arendt's concept of the social to an extreme, she is certainly not alone in her criticism. Arendt was already targeted during her lifetime for her insistence on purifying the political from the social. At a conference on Arendt's work, held in Toronto in 1972, Arendt's close friends Mary McCarthy and Richard J. Bernstein pressed Arendt on this issue. McCarthy poses the following question to Arendt:

I would like to ask you a question that I have had in my mind a long, long time. It is about the very sharp distinction [...] between the political and the social. [...] Now, I have always asked myself: "What is somebody supposed

to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what is left?" (Hill 1979, 315)

McCarthy's question is also one of the most common questions posed to Arendt in feminist secondary literature. Namely, what is left for politics, and political action more importantly, if questions regarding social injustice as well as social and economic discrimination are ruled out? Is it not absolutely crucial for democratic politics that social justice and equality are regarded as politically significant topics? An ideal of the political as pure from social "contamination" seems to lead to an aristocratic, exclusionary utopia in which only great deeds, honor, and perhaps war matter (cf. Wolin 1983; Pitkin 1998).

Arendt replies to Mary McCarthy that the affairs discussed in the public realm are historically contingent and vary with each generation. Thus, she claims that she is not trying to set the agenda for what is a properly political topic for public debate. Arendt emphasizes that her critique is targeted towards a very specific form of social organizing, which she calls the "bureaucratic mass society" and its "administrative form of governing" (Arendt in Hill 1979, 319-320.) Why does Arendt so passionately defend her specific, critical use of the terms "bureaucracy" and "administration" in connection with her critique of "the social," and what relevance might this choice of terminology have for feminist conceptualizations of the public sphere?

According to Seyla Benhabib, "the standard reading" of Arendt presents 'the social' as a monolithic, normative concept in Arendt's political theory, and as a term that discloses her inherently anti-modernist stance. According to this view, modernity marks for Arendt the decline of the public sphere and the emergence of a "national housekeeping" called *the social*. Furthermore, according to "the standard reading," "[t]he social is the perfect medium in which bureaucracy, the 'rule by nobody' emerges and unfolds" (Benhabib 1996/2003, 23).

In contrast to this view, Benhabib argues that Arendt's concept of the social is not unified and, more importantly, that the point is not that there is something essential about modernity that makes it inherently anti-political. Instead, the administrative and bureaucratic elements of the social are contingent facts and result from hundreds of years of bourgeois dominance. Although agreeing with Pitkin that Arendt's theory of the social is ambiguous and inaccurate, Benhabib does not regard Arendt's political philosophy as incompatible with democratic ideals and feminist politics. Quite the contrary, for Benhabib, "Arendt's distinction between 'the social' and 'the political'" and "[t]he concept of public space is

important from the standpoint of articulating a *feminist and radical democratic critique of the late welfare-state capitalist democracies*” (Benhabib 1993, 109, emphasis in the original; cf. Benhabib 1996/2003, xii-xiii). Thus, unlike Pitkin, who laments that a separation of the social and the political means the end of feminist politics, Benhabib claims the opposite to be the case.

Against the ”standard reading,” Benhabib claims that there are at least three different and significant meanings of ‘the social’ in Arendt and at least three different levels of analysis of the social/political divide (Benhabib 1996/2003, 22-23, 139-141). Firstly, the phrase ”the rise of the social” means the rise of the capitalist exchange market. Second, the concept of ‘the social’ signifies mass society and third, it means civil society.

Through a theoretical position inspired by the work of Marx, Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas and Karl Polanyi, Benhabib argues that Arendt’s critique of the social is driven by her critique of classical liberalism and capitalism. Economic interests begin to drive politics when the capitalist exchange commodity market emerges. In this context, the ”rise of the social” means thus that, ”[...] exchange relations emerge as an open and unrestricted medium of social interaction for all persons who happen to be commodity owners” (Benhabib 1996/2003, 25). Instead of a realm of public freedom and political action, as the public sphere is conceived in civic republicanism, in early modernity the public realm becomes a realm of economic exchange relations and private interests. At the same time, political cooperation becomes instrumentalized. The complex capitalist market economy finally intrudes into all aspects of life. Professional lobbyists and private corporations start to run a corrupted democracy in which the citizens are like consumers. It goes without saying that this administrative and bureaucratic model of governance has drastic anti-democratic consequences: ‘mass society’ and politics driven by class difference emerges, when economic and social status – not political rights – becomes the measurement of equality between people (Benhabib 1993, 110-111; Benhabib 1996/2003, 22-28).

Benhabib argues that clarifying the significance of Arendt’s critique of the social for feminist emancipatory projects can be done best by supplementing her philosophy with the work of other theorists, such as Karl Polanyi, Max Weber and Michel Foucault. *The Human Condition*, for instance, despite its sophisticated critique of the social, lacks according to Benhabib an analysis of how precisely the bureaucratic administration ”normalizes” people through its mechanisms of social coercion and control (Benhabib 1996/2003, 26).

Benhabib’s feminist position is shaped by theories of deliberate democracy as well as Jürgen

Habermas's communicative theory of action. She reads Arendt in tandem with Habermas, and it is through this double reading that she is able to formulate her novel interpretation of Arendt as an important ally to feminist critiques of capitalist liberal democracies (ibid. xii-xiii). To clarify my point, let me quote a passage in which Benhabib states that her own reading is an "alternative genealogy of modernity" (ibid, 22). "Alternative" here means a critical, yet affirmative conception of modernity.

These [liberal democratic] bureaucracies have frequently disempowered women and other affected groups and have set the agenda for public debate and participation. In reflecting about these issues feminism has lacked a critical model of public space and public discourse. A critical model of public space is necessary to enable us to draw the line between 'juridification,' *Verrechtlichung* in Jürgen Habermas's term [sic], or between making 'social' and 'administering to' in Arendtian terms, on the one hand, and between 'making public,' in the sense of making accessible to debate, reflection, action and moral-political transformation on the other [...] As feminists we have lacked a critical model which would distinguish between the bureaucratic administration of needs and collective democratic empowerment over them. (Benhabib 1993, 110.)

In other words, Benhabib highlights the difference between social and political equality by claiming that having access to, for instance, social well-being is not true empowerment, since it does not entail having the power to decide how and who administers and distributes the public good in the first place. Having access to the public space and public discourse is, according to Benhabib, equivalent to having access to political rights, such as the right to political participation and decision-making. A feminist critical public discourse would enable women to take the initiative and set the agenda regarding questions most relevant to them, as well as decisions that influence their lives most (Benhabib 2002; cf. Fraser 2005; Fraser 2012). Benhabib's own view regarding a properly democratic and feminist processes is best crystallized in the following passage from *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (1996):

Only those norms (i.e., general rules of action and institutional arrangements) can be said to be valid (i.e., morally binding), which would be agreed to by *all* those affected by their consequences, if such agreement were reached as a consequence of a process of deliberation that had the following features:

1) participation in such deliberation is governed by norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open debate; 2) all have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation; and 3) *all* have the right to initiate reflexive arguments *about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out.* (Benhabib 1996, 70, my emphasis)

What then would such a "critical model of [the] public space and public discourse" look like? Although Benhabib's claim of the lack of a feminist public discourse and public space is controversial, let us assume for the sake of the argument that throughout its history, feminist political organizing and theorizing has really lacked a properly functioning and radical conception of these two. Where should one then begin to look for possible models? Benhabib's answer is: Hannah Arendt.

As I have pointed out, unlike Hanna Pitkin, for instance, Benhabib reads Arendt by decentralizing the hegemonic position of *The Human Condition* in Arendtscholarship (Benhabib 1996/2003, xxv, 118). Thus, for her, "[a]sking the women's question, as always, signifies a movement from margin to center in the hermeneutical task" and hence "[...] one begins not with *The Human Condition* but with a text that certainly does not occupy a central place in any systematic interpretation of her political philosophy, namely *Rahel Varnhagen*, subtitled *The Life of a Jewish Woman*" (ibid, 4-5). As a response to the lack of a theory of a feminist public space, Benhabib claims to find an important positive view of the social in Arendt's early biography of Rahel Varnhagen. This is the conception of the Berlin salons as *female* public spheres. Perhaps, thus, Arendt was not in fact silent about gender after all?

### ***Arendt's nascent theory of women's public spaces***

In 1929, after finishing her doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in St. Augustin, Arendt engaged herself in a biographical book project on Rahel Varnhagen (1777-1833). Arendt's interest was to explore Jewishness from an existentialist framework.<sup>18</sup> Rahel (née Levin) Varnhagen, a Jewish writer and socialite, significantly influenced the spread of German romanticism and also the rise of the Jewish salon culture of Berlin. Varnhagen was born to a wealthy merchant family and was thus in a privileged position compared to

<sup>18</sup> She did not finish the book manuscript until 1938 and it was published as an English translation in 1957 and in the original German language in 1958 as *Rahel Varnhagen. Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik* (*Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 1958) (Benhabib 1995, 6-8).

the majority of European Jews, who suffered from poverty. Drawing from Debora Hertz's (1988) comprehensive history of Jewish high society, Benhabib explains that Jewish women who ran salons and social clubs in their homes managed through their activity to emancipate themselves both from the patriarchal family structure and religious culture (Benhabib 1996/2003, 15). Following Hertz, Benhabib argues that the salons were a new kind of social space, run by women, in which intellectuals, artists, politicians and writers from different religious groups, sexes and classes could freely exchange ideas and engage in conversation (cf. Landes 1998). The social sphere emerged in certain contexts of modernity as a specifically female, quasi-public space with a positive connotation. As Arendt wrote on Varhagen's social life with enthusiasm, Benhabib suggests that Arendt did in fact take into account the possibility of a female public space.

They [the salons] were *social events* in which literary and artistic works were read, discussed, contracted and exchanged; they were *social processes* through which individuals of a hierarchical ancient regime with its formalized manners of speech, intercourse and affection learned new and non-hierarchical, more fluid forms of self- and other presentation. [...] [It included] very often an experimentation with gender roles and sexual expectations as well. (Benhabib 1996/2003, 16, emphasis in the original).

Benhabib argues that there is thus a hidden theoretical thread in Arendt's philosophy and in her reflection of the social sphere that actually works in favor of a positive, feminist interpretation of her work. Arendt began to sketch out a positive conception of the social, which she then for some reason later dropped and forgot (ibid. 22, 29). Nevertheless, Benhabib is optimistic about her finding. "If we read her [Arendt's] work from the margins towards the center, then we can displace her fascination with the polis to make room for her more modernist and women-friendly reflections of the salons" (ibid. 20). "The rise of the social" thus receives an important positive meaning, and does not merely signify the rise of the capitalist commodity exchange market and the normalizing power of bureaucratic administration. In Benhabib's view, this also implies a more positive conception of the rise of modernity, and finally proves that the reading of Arendt as an anti-modernist Grecophile is a fiction created by "the standard readings" of her work (ibid. 22, 29). "Arendt's Rahel Varnhagen biography leaves its traces throughout her work and suggests a major rereading of her understanding of modernity and of the place of politics under conditions of modernity" (ibid.).

Benhabib's reading of *Rahel Varnhagen* is one of the texts in which her feminist position

is clearly shaped by Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this work, Habermas conceptualizes the emergence of a "literary public sphere," which consists of coffee houses and salons among other places, in which people come together and engage in free debates through their use of reason. The printing press, newspapers and the birth of the novel are characteristic elements of this Enlightenment era. What is new is the birth of a literary audience, which does not need direct speech and action as a means of communication. Since the goal of the use of public reason is to reach a consensus through public discourse, "the literary public sphere" is according to Habermas the precondition for the emergence of a proper "political public sphere" and a functioning deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1962/1991, 51-57). Benhabib argues that Habermas was in fact indebted to Arendt in his discovery of the public sphere, but developed and transformed this central concept in many significant ways (Benhabib 1996/2003, xii-xiii, 199). Thus, Arendt needs to be re-interpreted by reading her through a Habermasian lens. "Through Habermas's systematic transformations of this Arendtian concept [public space], it becomes possible for us to reestablish the link between the public sphere and democratic legitimacy" (ibid, 200). Hence, Benhabib's Arendtian version of Habermas is needed to make sense of Arendt's critique of the social as well to see where the promise of Arendt's theory lies for feminist radical democratic projects.

Benhabib's analysis of the Jewish salons is original within feminist Arendt scholarship. However, according to some theorists, the Habermasian tone in Benhabib's reading of *Varnhagen* poses certain challenges to her interpretation. In her extensive research on the idea of political emancipation in Arendt's Jewish writings, Tuija Parvikko (1996), for instance, questions the accuracy of Benhabib's reading and contends that the idea according to which the Berlin salons provided a positive female public space in Arendt's thinking is questionable.

Parvikko holds Benhabib accountable for failing to properly take into account the fact that the division between the political and the social is present even in Arendt's early biography of Varnhagen. Why this is important for Parvikko is that the division does not merely mark a "relentless pessimism about the significance of the salons" (Benhabib 1996/2003, 21, 22), but is crucial for Arendt's entire theorization of political emancipation. The Jewish women who ran salons may have reached a degree of social equality unheard of before. However, and this is according to Parvikko Arendt's point, Varnhagen and the other socialites did not achieve *political*, participatory equality. Instead, their social emancipation was based on assimilation. In more Arendtian terms, they had to compromise their uniqueness and distinctness in order to climb the social ladder.



Parvikko examines a conceptual distinction that Arendt makes in her early Jewish texts. This is the distinction between the Jewish *parvenu* and the Jewish *pariah*. According to Arendt, marginalized groups of people – European Jews in this case – had two ways of coping with their vulnerable position in society and in their plight for recognition. One was to become a *parvenu*, to try to assimilate to the main society and thus attempt to integrate and become *social* members of that society, with the price of neglecting or denying one's difference.

The other strategy, that of conscious pariahdom, was to accept the challenge and responsibility of being an outsider, and thus remain on the margins of society, embracing one's difference and fighting for full *political* and *legal* recognition. Arendt never limited the concept of the pariah to Jewish persons alone, but insisted that any marginalized or persecuted group of people could take on this position in their struggle for political emancipation (Parvikko 1996).

Arendt is quite explicit in her view that the Jewish salons never became playgrounds of Jewish politics. More precisely, according to her interpretation the question of Jewish emancipation was never raised in the Jewish salons but rather it was avoided. In other words, neither the question of Jews' political rights nor the question of human political rights and enfranchisement at large was touched upon [...]. For them, the salons were not spaces for beginning something new in Jewish terms or spaces of pariah politics, but rather they were spaces for coming into contact with important Gentiles and realizing their individual desire to arrive in German culture. (Parvikko 1996, 83-84)

What Benhabib's Habermasian optimism regarding the Berlin salons does not take into account then, is that Arendt's critique of the social is in many significant ways a critique of high society in particular. Thus, Parvikko argues that what for Benhabib marks female emancipation, exemplifies for Arendt a failure in pariahdom. Through the creation of the salon, Varhagen tried to become "normal," a member of German respectable high society, and in the process ended up compromising and conforming to the very same social order that had led to her being political discriminated against in the first place (JP, 71, 76-78). Parvikko elaborates that the salon represents for Arendt a dream-like world which allows an escape from political reality. Thus, the *political* factors contributing to one's discriminated position in society are not dealt with. Instead they are ignored. Parvikko concludes by claiming the following: "In my view, there is a basic confusion in Benhabib's reasoning.

This is the confusion between social and political pariahdom” (Parvikko 1996, 87).

Here the importance of Arendt’s critique of the social lies in the significance of social conformism for the birth of political anti-Semitism. Dana Villa has argued that as a student of Alexis de Tocqueville, Arendt was well aware that often, reaching consensus through public opinion is actually not a sign of a functioning deliberative democracy (as Habermas claims) but instead an element of the ”tyranny of the majority” (HC, 39; cf. Villa 2008, 85-86). As the Nuremberg race laws – or later the Jim Crow laws and related apartheid legislation – came into power, social assimilation became impossible, since state-sanctioned political rights were based on ethnicity and, finally, an ethnically homogenous conception of nationality. A central thesis as well as a serious topic of concern in Arendt’s analysis of the history of anti-Semitism is that Jews throughout Europe lacked proper *political* organizing in their resistance (HC, 54-56). Thus the Jews, according to Arendt ”always had to pay with political misery for social glory and with social insult for political success” (OT, 54-55). This was according to her also the case of Rahel Varnhagen (cf. Parvikko). I will return to the importance of the concepts of the ‘pariah’ and the ‘parvenu’ in more detail later on, in the context of my study on queer readings of Arendt (Part III). For now, I want to draw attention to these terms in order to highlight Benhabib’s Habermasian interpretation of social and public spaces.

Benhabib’s reading culminates in the claim that the reason for Arendt’s decision to keep the vocabularies of the social and the political separate on a discursive level is that without political rights, social rights are not secured either. The social and the political are in this sense always intertwined and cannot be separated from each other.

In order to clarify and strengthen my overall argument in this chapter, I will next examine this insight of Benhabib by turning to the work of Linda Zerilli. I will argue that Zerilli’s theorization of the ”social question” provides an interesting counter-argument to Benhabib’s Habermasian reading. Like Benhabib, Zerilli is interested in the interconnectedness between social and political equality from a feminist perspective. However, the main concern in her work is first and foremost the question of political freedom. This enables Zerilli to stress the agonistic element of Arendt’s conception of politics, a theme that Benhabib does not explore. Equally importantly, Zerilli’s reading brings forth Arendt not only as a thinker in the German Existenz-philosophical tradition, but as a student of the architects of the American Republic. This point of inquiry adds a new angle to the discussion of Arendt among the tradition of feminist political philosophy and illuminates what is at stake for feminism in her highly controversial separation of social justice and political equality.

Zerilli's interpretation uses Arendt's texts to disclose internal tensions and dilemmas within the history of feminist political theorizing itself.

### **2.3 Towards an Arendtian feminist politics of freedom**

In line with Pitkin and Benhabib, Zerilli is also puzzled by the perplexing connection between the "social question" and the silence on gender in Arendt's political writings. Zerilli argues that although Arendt's critique of the social has many resemblances with Foucault's analysis of modern society, what stands out in Arendt is that she seems to regard all questions related to the body as belonging to the private, or the social sphere and hence, ruled out from politics (Zerilli 1995; Zerilli 2005, 3). Like Mary McCarthy and Pitkin, Zerilli asks: "[i]f issues of housing, poverty, fair wages, and child care are by definition social, not political, what on earth would people talk about when they come together politically? Why would they come together politically at all?" (ibid.).

For Zerilli, it is hard to even imagine feminist politics as anything other than an ongoing debate concerning all the questions that Arendt rules out as "social." Nevertheless, in line with Benhabib, Zerilli suggests that perhaps Arendt did in fact not make such a sharp distinction between the two realms, but was simply a theorist who had severe reservations about bringing an instrumentalist or utilitarian attitude to politics.

Whereas Benhabib is mostly interested in the relevance of Arendt's critique of classical liberalism and capitalism for her own radical democratic feminist project, Zerilli turns the needle of the compass towards the discipline of feminist theory itself. This is one of the reasons why reading Zerilli parallel with early second wave theorists provides an excellent window to the polyphony of feminist Arendt scholarship as well as to the question of what various theorists derive from Arendt's silence on gender. Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* is an example of how by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, feminist Arendt receptions are equally concerned with deciphering Arendt's conceptual distinctions as they are with understanding and reevaluating the feminist tradition itself. Zerilli argues that Arendt's perplexing silence on questions regarding gender and the connection of her silence to the critique of the social, can in fact tell us something valuable about feminism or feminisms and its or their continuing self-questioning. Hence, Zerilli states:

A difficult but valuable partner in feminist dialogue, the *non-feminist* Arendt presses us to ask, how does the frame of the social question blind us to whatever does not fit within the frame? How is feminism, in particular,

limited in its perceived identification with the social question? Are there other political visions and practices with which feminism might instead be partnered? (ibid. 4, my emphasis)

Whereas Benhabib's provocative claim is that feminist theorists have lacked a proper conception of a critical public space and a critical discourse, Zerilli suggests that the problem is in fact somewhere deeper. The real problem is a flawed way of framing the discussion concerning freedom. Despite its self-declaration as an emancipatory movement, claims Zerilli, Western feminists have mostly concerned themselves with gaining social justice and equality, thus jeopardizing the plight for equal political, and participatory rights, in other words the plight for full political freedom (ibid. 4, 8-9).

Does this imply that the plight for social justice and the plight for political rights are mutually exclusive? Are the two not fundamentally interlinked in several important ways, as Zerilli herself proposes? The two are indeed seen here as interlinked, but Zerilli stresses the dangers of putting too much emphasis on the struggle for social justice. This is because, according to her inquiry into the history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American feminism, the social question has dictated what type of claims can be considered as political in the first place.

[...] a claim to freedom could not be articulated or heard *unless* it was uttered as a claim to social justice, which in turn could only be heard in the idiom of the social question. Women's claims to freedom, in other words, was a claim to social justice, which would allow for a more just solution to the social question. (ibid. 6, italics in original)

Drawing from Denise Riley's (1988) book "*Am I that Name?*" *Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, Zerilli argues that the problem is not the plight for social justice as such, but the fact that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social issues became feminized. Furthermore, the supposed natural characteristics of femininity also determined the social function of women as a group. Since the debates concerning women's rights were centered around the social question, early American women's emancipation movements had to build on the argument that there was something unique about femininity which enabled women to understand questions of social justice better than their male counterparts as if the motivation for women's liberation was to improve society. Thus "[...] women came to be seen more as a sociological group with a particular social agenda than as an emerging political collectivity with unqualified democratic demands" (ibid. 6-7). Zerilli is well aware that the problem of social injustice and social discrimination are serious and real

problems. Keeping in mind the civil rights movement, for instance, she also acknowledges that at times, framing the plight for political emancipation using the rhetoric of "the social question" may be a productive political strategy. Nevertheless, according to her argument, in the context of the history of American feminism, the logic of social utility "[...] keeps women's radical demand for freedom, for unqualified participation in common affairs, bound to an economy of use that deeply restricts their emergence as a political collectivity [...]" (ibid, 9). As a counter-example to the trend that values women's freedom due to women's usefulness in solving social issues, Zerilli points out Mary Wollstonecraft's demand for equal *political* rights, which for her, much as it did for Thomas Jefferson and Arendt, meant the right to participate in government.

### ***Shortcomings in the first, second and third waves***

How then do we counter this logic of utility? How do we articulate a conception of political freedom that provides an understanding of women as a political group, not merely as a social group? Zerilli's answer is: by nothing less than by finding a new way of conceptualizing freedom and its relation to feminism. This, however, is no easy task to accomplish, since freedom has according to Zerilli always been theorized in the context of subjectivity, despite the fact that the epistemic framework of identity and subject-formation block the view from new ways of visualizing freedom. Zerilli engages in a meta-framing of the history of Anglophone feminist political organizing and locates three distinct phases in this tradition. She then locates their most significant shortcomings in terms of formulating a feminist theory of freedom.

To assume, as many first- and second-wave feminists did, that a shared gender identity is what relates women politically is flawed not only because, as third-wave feminists claimed, differences among women matter and the very category of identity itself is suspect. It is flawed because it does not answer to the question of what possible relevance identity can have for feminist politics absent a space in which to articulate it as a *political* relation. Third-wave critiques, too, are mostly silent on how to constitute the political space in which the transformation of social relations, including gendered forms of subjectivity, is to occur. (ibid. 20, italics in original)

This diagnosis of what is lacking from the focus of feminist, democratic and emancipatory projects, is thus akin to Benhabib's insight about the lack of a feminist public space.

Both hold that the articulation of a feminist public space is a precondition for theorizing feminist, radical democratic politics and it is here that both see Arendt's greatest potential. However, whereas Benhabib reads Arendt through Habermas's political-sociological framework, and examines the emergence of the public sphere in modernity, Zerilli digs into Arendt's philosophical vocabulary through an analytic tool-kit provided by Stanley Cavell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The presence of Wittgenstein is evident in Zerilli's way of problematizing the framing of freedom as either a "social question" or a "subject question," since framing in this context means the linguistic contextualization of a problem, and is related to Wittgenstein's conception of "language-games" (Zerilli 2005, 42-43). Interestingly, then, both Hanna Pitkin and Zerilli come from a Wittgensteinian background but arrive at very different conclusions with respect to both the history of feminism as well as their interpretations of Arendt.<sup>19</sup>

So what then is the framing of freedom that is so attractive in Arendt? According to Zerilli, Arendt does not theorize freedom in relation to a sovereign or an autonomous subject, in other words, she does not hold freedom to be something that is possessed. Neither is she interested in identity politics, but instead regards freedom as always dynamic and relational, as the achievement of a heterogeneous group of people joining spontaneously in order to act together and start something new (Zerilli 2005, 175; HC, 177, 200-201). What this means in practice is that Arendt is not concerned with formulating political agency in relation to an identity group, such as "women." Instead, her focus is on the question of what makes the political coming together possible in the first place?

In striking contrast to the theorists I have discussed in the first chapter of this section, who base their feminist interpretations of Arendt on the second chapter of *The Human*

<sup>19</sup> Although intriguing, the connection between Zerilli, Cavell and Wittgenstein as well as the divergent ways in which Hanna Pitkin and Zerilli appropriate Wittgenstein in their Arendt interpretations, is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I will summarize Wittgenstein's key points briefly. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein stresses that the challenge for philosophy is to focus on the complexity of our uses of language (PI §23). He pays attention to the fact that our use of language is dependent on various factual, contingent cultural and historical conditions that shape our existence as a linguistic community (cf. Wittgenstein 1967/1981 §§387-388, §390). In order to demonstrate this, he introduces the concept of *language-games* (*Sprachspiel*). According to Wittgenstein, what has traditionally been understood by "language" is in fact a wide network of different practices of various languages. There is no universal, foundational "meta-language" or a logic common to all language-games, even though the language-games resemble each other, like the members of a family (Wittgenstein 1953/2004 §§65-67). In contrast to the view of philosophy that he presented in *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, the later Wittgenstein contends that the task of philosophy cannot be the construction of a universally valid theory as the *prima philosophiae* (ibid. §109, §126). Neither can philosophy form empirical hypotheses in order to *explain* language. The task of philosophy is thus *descriptive* (ibid. §109). What philosophy describes are the various rules that determine how words are used within a certain language-game. Wittgenstein calls his method a therapy of language (PI §133)

*Condition*, Zerilli, much like Honig, draws extensively from the fifth chapter of the text in order to frame the task of constituting a feminist public space. Let me show how different the concepts of the public and the private appear through Zerilli's angle of interpretation.

As I have elaborated earlier, in the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, titled "Action," Arendt famously theorizes political action as spontaneous and with outcomes that are always indeterminate and contingent. According to her, we cannot pre-calculate the exact outcome of our actions since they are always performed in an inter-subjective, pluralistic and perspectival context with the possibility of other peoples' interference (HC, 188). Nevertheless, through acting we can take initiatives and begin something new.

Despite the fact that acting involves taking risks, it also enables people to establish meaningful relationships with each other, something that Arendt calls weaving the "web of human relationships" (HC, 188). By using the metaphor of the web, Arendt deliberately refuses to postulate any kind of a collective, unified subject, group or class consciousness as the agent of collective action. The metaphor of the web also ties her conception of action close to her conception of power (*potentia, Möglichkeit*) as something that is constituted when people act in concert according to their free choice to do so. Thus, power for Arendt is not primarily coercive and all-encompassing, although it can be that too. It is first and foremost productive and enabling (Zerilli 2005 20-21; HC, 200; CR, 142-143). Zerilli highlights that Arendt thus conceptualizes the notions of "freedom" and "power" in highly similar ways. Both are something that emerges when heterogeneous people come together and act in concert. What also emerges through this free practice of speech and action is the "space of appearances," also called the "public realm," and the "political realm." What Zerilli holds to be particularly striking in Arendt's formulation of freedom and the public sphere, is that this fragile realm is something that can potentially disappear, under conditions of total domination for instance, as was the case with Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism. Hence, an account of political freedom that does not contain an account of how to sustain and protect the fragile, public realm of appearance is really no account of freedom at all.

According to Zerilli then, feminist theorists have forgotten their own origin in the revolutionary tradition and have taken for granted the existence of a public space in which social transformation and subjectivation takes place. By drawing our attention away both from the "social question" and "the subject question," and by attracting our attention to Arendt's conception of political action as a world-building activity, Zerilli claims to be able to present a new way of framing freedom. The benefit of this Arendtian world-building approach, claims Zerilli, is that "[...] counterpractices of political association need not

reproduce subjected identities as the condition of having anything political to say, but might create public spaces in which something is said that changes what can be heard as a political claim and also alters the context in which identities themselves are presently constituted as subject/ed” (ibid. 24; cf. Warner 2002).

In other words, what Zerilli characterizes as the ”first,” ”second” and ”third wave” feminist movements have according to her evolved into a framework in which individuals either assuming a collective identity (such as ‘women’) or refusing and resisting a collective identity (such as ”heterosexual” or ”white”), make claims that are politically intelligible. What Zerilli suggests as an alternative strategy is to alter and adjust the framework itself by the kind of counter practices in which the motivation of collective agency is not the pursuing of interests shared by an identity-group, but instead the creation of new public spaces in which previously unimaginable topics become politically intelligible (ibid. 61, 181). But how and by whom are such public spaces created? What is the feminist position from which this task is carried out? A new generation of ”fourth wave” feminists? Zerilli’s answer is: by the political community that engages in the practice of making political judgments.

In comparison to Benhabib and Parvikko, for instance, who both use European history to contextualize and concretize Arendt, some critics such as Anna Elomäki claim that Zerilli’s reading is at times highly abstract and theoretical (Elomäki 2012). Factual events, such as the rise of totalitarianism, or Arendt’s theorization of Jewish resistance, which help see Arendt’s concepts as context-sensitive, do not play a major role in Zerilli’s theoretically oriented approach.

On a somewhat different, but related ground to Elomäki, Pulkkinen (2008) argues that Zerilli’s critique of feminism and ”the subject question,” ”...conflates different meanings of the concept, most importantly the notions of an individual human subject and a collective political subject” (Pulkkinen 2008, 123). Taken together, the critiques of Elomäki and Pulkkinen problematize Zerilli’s typology of first, second and third wave feminists. Rather than dropping out ”the subject” from feminist theorizing, Pulkkinen suggests that we need to differentiate various meanings assigned to the subject, such as ”women as a group,” women as a ”political subject” and finally the subject as a result of ”subjectivation.” All three uses of the term refer to ”subjects called ‘women’” (ibid. 120-121).

When Zerilli proposes that feminists should take their cue from Hannah Arendt and dismiss *the* ‘subject question’, she does this without differentiating between the different meanings of the subject or between the three different



subject issues of feminist political theory. Instead, she discusses as if the feminist subject questions were one and the same. Arendt's thought, according to her, helps us to shift the focus from the question of the subject to that of the world. (ibid. 124, italics in original)

Pulkkinen argues that because of the lack of differentiation between various meanings of "the subject question," Zerilli's reading fails to convincingly establish Arendt as an ally for feminist political theorizing. "Arendt does not consider subjectivation, let alone gendered subjectivation, at all...Arendt can thus be seen as a highly problematic guide for the feminist problems of politics..." (ibid. 126). For Pulkkinen, the consequence of the monolithic meaning of "the subject question" is that Zerilli hence conflates "freedom," "the social question" and "the subject question." Why this is particularly problematic according to Pulkkinen, is that Zerilli's rejection of "the subject question" does not leave room for a feminist critique of subjectivation. "[G]endering political agents and gendering individuals through cultural norms remain acute feminist subject issues" (ibid. 131).

I will return to the question of 'subjectivation' as well as the normative gendering of subjects in chapter 6, where I examine gay studies and queer elaborations on Arendt. In light of the interpretations in chapter 6, it turns out that although Arendt never used the term "subjectivation" and never discussed subjectivation in the context of gendering or sexualizing persons as 'women' and 'men,' for instance, her critique of coerced normalization as part of social conformism as well as her discussion of the social construction of Jewishness and homosexuality as pathological "races" are still considered as helpful precisely for theorizing subjectivation.

To conclude, this Part provides a thorough analysis of three main themes in the Anglophone feminist debate concerning Arendt's silence on gender. These are 1) Arendt's distinction between the public and the private, 2) Arendt's enigmatic conception of the body and 3) her critique of the social.

I argue that these three themes undergo repeated critical contestation throughout four decades of Anglophone feminist Arendt scholarship. I suggest that the reason for the ongoing debate is both historical and textual. On one hand, specific historical contexts, such as the American second wave feminist movement of the 1970s, motivated theorists to examine themes and concepts relevant to this particular era. On the other hand, *The Human Condition*, Arendt's main textual source for Anglophone feminist interpretations, is structured in two parts that generate opposing interpretational stances.

In chapter 1, I identified two distinct ways of responding to Arendt's silence on gender in Anglophone debates. What I termed early second wave responses to Arendt hold that despite the fact that Arendt was a woman, her indifference with regard to the history of gender-specific forms of oppression and male dominance makes her philosophy incompatible with the central ideals of feminist political theorizing. In chapter 1.1, I specified how these readings, by framing Arendt through the ideals of sisterhood and solidarity among women, as well the conception of women as a unified identity group, came to conceive Arendt as an anti-feminist. Furthermore, I argue that by understanding masculinity and men as synonymous, early second wave readers operate with notions of masculinity as the polar opposite to women and hence as antagonistic to the plight of the women's movement. Arendt's passion towards Ancient Greek and Roman texts, combined with her ignorance of feminist history, led to the conclusion that Arendt was in fact a masculine Grecophile. I show that this reading of Arendt was predominant in Anglophone Arendt scholarship until the late 1990s.

My analysis in chapter 1.2 of feminist responses to Arendt's conception of the body illustrates and clarifies how the adoption of concepts from postmodern theorizing, such as "performativity," "difference" and "contingency," gradually shift the focus of the debates on Arendt. I contend that by the 1990s, several feminist theorists explore the possible proto-feminist tendencies in Arendt's thinking, despite her silence on gender. By reading early second wave feminist interpreters of Arendt in tandem with theorists writing in a very different academic setting of the 1990s and later, my discussion in this chapter has sought to clarify the specific histories of the vocabularies that various feminist theorists operate with.

In chapter 2, I focused on locating narrative, theoretical and thematic shifts in feminist responses to Arendt by examining how three major theorists of Arendt respond to her critique of the social. Through my analysis I highlighted the fact that early second wave vocabulary which represented Arendt as a masculine Grecophile is still prevalent in some interpretations from the end of the 1990s. Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* (1998) is one such example. Taken together, my findings in chapters 1-2 indicate that the shifts of interpretational focus and framing are gradual. There is no clear break or "turn" between early and later second wave framings of Arendt. Instead, internally contradictory stances on Arendt's relation to gender and feminism appear parallel to each other. My reading strategy reveals that there is a rich polyphony within feminist scholarship, which is reflected in the differing conclusions that feminist readers of Arendt come to. Hence, by studying feminist interpretations of Arendt, we do not only learn about Arendt's stance

with respect to various feminist positions, but also about the rich and diverse tradition of feminist scholarship itself.

In addition, through my discussion in Part I, I have sought to clarify how it is possible that Arendt emerges both as an anti-feminist *and* a proto-feminist in Anglophone, secondary literature on her work. I will return to the latter stance in detail in part III, where I focus on postmodern feminist interpretations of Arendt. Part III also returns to Arendt's contested female masculinity, by elaborating on how the introduction of queer studies on masculinity as well as the rise of academic, critical masculinity studies complicate notions of "women" and "men," "femininity" and "masculinity" as polar opposites. Before these inquiries, however, I want to next examine two dominant responses to Arendt within the Continental tradition of feminist Arendt scholarship, because as I will argue, these two interpretations of Arendt as a *feminine* thinker (as opposed to Arendt being a masculine Grecophile) are born in the context of Italian and French feminist theorizing<sup>20</sup>.

For Adriana Cavarero, particularly Luce Irigaray's critical engagement with Western philosophy and psychoanalysis turns out to be a significant source of inspiration for her feminist elaboration on Arendt. While Julia Kristeva's theoretical framework and entire project is certainly different from that of Cavarero, it nevertheless bears an important kinship to Cavarero's interpretation. For both Cavarero and Kristeva, the most promising concepts in Arendt's philosophy are "natality," "birth" and "life." Kristeva does not need Irigaray in order to read Arendt through a framework of sexual difference, but draws instead from her own feminist critique of Lacan, utilizing concepts such as "the semiotic," "abjection," "matricide," "chora" and "genius" for deciphering Arendt's complex philosophy.

I will argue that for Kristeva, Arendt's philosophical writing is an expression of Arendt herself as a woman and a thinker. Hence, in addition to scholarly texts, autobiographical facts and documents, such as personal letters and diary notes are also an important methodological resource for Kristeva. Arendt's personal experience of totalitarianism as well as her ambivalent relation to both Jewish and female identity, are extracted by Kristeva

<sup>20</sup> I this dissertation, I specialize on Kristeva and Cavarero in particular, since their work on Arendt have been most widely read and recited in the international, feminist tradition of Arendt scholarship. For other Italian, French and Spanish feminist readings on Arendt's thinking, see for instance Christiane Veauvy (2004) Laura Boella (1995 and 1998), Olivia Guaraldo (2001), Margarete Durst (2001 and 2007), Comesaña Santalices (2001), Begoña González Rodríguez (2001) and Guerra Palmero (2011).

as the horizon against which Arendt develops her unique philosophical language. As a practicing psychoanalyst and a feminist theorist, Kristeva aims to interpret this language as an expression of a female genius.

In line with the Anglophone early second wave theorists that I have discussed in Part I of this study, French and Italian, phenomenologically and psychoanalytically motivated readings also highlight the biases of a male-dominated tradition of thought. The Western tradition of political and philosophical thinking is here conceived as being obsessed with such matters as death, violence, abstract universals and the eternal. However, as I have pointed out in the discussion above, none of Arendt's strongest Anglophone critics from the 1970s and 80s inquire into Arendt's conception of 'natality' and related concepts, such as "birth" and "life." Although "birth" is a central category in Mary O'Brien's *The Politics of Reproduction*, for instance, and despite the fact that O'Brien envisions that "feminist philosophy will be a philosophy of birth and regeneration" (O'Brien 1981, 200), she nevertheless regards Arendt as incompatible with feminist emancipation. Likewise, Wendy Brown contends that Arendt's notion of politics "has nothing whatsoever to do with life or need" (Brown 1988, 23). Hartsock (1983) and Elshtain (1986), on the other hand, do mention natality, but only in passing, and neither builds an entire feminist philosophy around birth and new beginnings.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Bowen-Moore's *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (1989) is to my knowledge the only, English book-length study on Arendt's concept of natality. Miguel Vatter's "Natality and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt" (2006), Anne O'Byrne's *Natality and Finitude* (2010) and Scott & Stark's commentary to *Love and St. Augustine* also contain extensive analyses of the concept of natality in Arendt's thought. However, Bowen-Moore, Vatter, O'Byrne and Scott & Stark do not analyze natality explicitly with reference to French and Italian feminist theorizing, or in relation to Arendt's silence on gender. Furthermore, even Bonnie Honig's extensive edited volume *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995), does not contain articles examining natality in Arendt. Iris-Marion Young (1990) has famously examined pregnant embodiment in *Throwing Like a Girl*, but does not refer to Arendt's notion of natality in this context. The same applies to Julia Kristeva's early examinations of the experience of pregnancy.





**Part II**  
**The female genius**

### 3. Natality and sexual difference

Adriana Cavarero is an unusual Arendt commentator in the sense that she rarely explicitly refers to Arendt's texts, other than to the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, which I have in this study argued is the most famous of Arendt's texts on action, narration and natality. Rather than engaging in Arendt exegesis, Cavarero uses certain Arendtian themes as stepping-stones for the articulation of her own, unique feminist project. Thus, the reader must be able to spot the intertextual references to Arendt in Cavarero's works, and they are numerous. In light of the discussion in Part I of this study, Cavarero's project, which emphasizes motherhood, corporeality and sexual difference, may appear to stand squarely with Arendt's conceptual distinctions, such as "public/private" and "labor/action." Nevertheless, in striking contrast to Anglophone feminist theorists such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981) and Brown (1988), for instance, Cavarero's reading of Arendt aims to open up a space for theorizing precisely embodiment, intimacy, motherhood, relationality and plurality from a radically *feminine* and feminist perspective. The conclusion that Cavarero draws from Arendt's silence on gender is thus the complete opposite from the contention that Arendt is a masculine Grecophile.

In chapter 3, I argue that although Cavarero explicitly frames Arendt through Luce Irigaray's *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (An Ethics of Sexual Difference 1984/1993), her overall project is so invested in Arendt's philosophy that Cavarero can in fact be called an Arendtian feminist. In what follows, I argue that there are three particular themes that constitute the pillars of her project, namely natality, sexual difference and the attempt to reverse matricide.<sup>22</sup> I seek to show that an essential characteristic of Cavarero's method is that she deliberately takes Arendt's concepts out of their context – "steals" them, to use Cavarero's own term – and then tests them in a discourse entirely foreign to them. Through this process, Cavarero establishes her own arguments as well as discloses the limits of Arendt's thinking.

In contrast to Cavarero, Julia Kristeva has written a book-length study on Arendt as part of her trilogy on female genius.<sup>23</sup> Highlighting "life" as the most important element in

<sup>22</sup> For the purpose of my analysis in this chapter, it is sufficient to state that by "sexual difference" I refer to Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero. For a detailed analysis of the multiple meanings and historical usage of "sexual difference" within Francophone and Anglophone feminist theorizing, see Berger (2014) and Bono & Kemp (1993). For a rich discussion on "sexual difference" within the specific context of the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, see Heinämaa (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva (1999) *Le génie féminine. La vie, la folie, les mots: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette* [*The Female Genius. Life, Madness, Words: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette*. Ross Guberman (transl.), Columbia University Press, 2002].



Arendt's oeuvre, Kristeva shares Cavarero's fascination with the concept of "natality," but responds to the lack of a theory of gender in Arendt by interpreting Arendt through her own original psychoanalytic framework of abjection and matricide. I will argue that Cavarero and Julia Kristeva part ways with regard to their attitude towards feminism and their opposing conceptions of matricide<sup>24</sup> in particular. Whereas Cavarero sees feminist philosophizing as an ethical task which aims at making the maternal and feminine voice heard, Kristeva on the other hand equates feminism with identity politics and ideology, and expresses deep reservations about the political implications of all forms of ideologies. In chapter 4 I argue that interpreting matricide as a necessary element of psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva theorizes matricide as the *sine qua non* for the development of linguistic subjectivity. According to Kristeva, failure to account for matricide leads to a failure to operate with symbolic language and hence also to a failure to account for the semiotic, the feminine, the maternal and most importantly, the value and vulnerability of life. This failure further leads to thanatopolitical projects, in which ideology draws from death, destruction and totalizing omnipotence. Natality hence opens up a path for Kristeva's critique of totalitarianism.

For Cavarero, on the other hand, matricide signifies the deliberate erasure of the feminine and the maternal from the history of Western thought and hence she regards matricide as historically contingent and open to reversal. One of the most important ethical tasks of Cavarero's project is to theorize the genealogy of matricide and rewrite the history of the feminine voice into Western thought. Even though Cavarero radicalizes Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic," her overall project is thus closer to Irigaray and Arendt than to Kristeva. Towards the end of Part II, I will discuss Cavarero's critique of Kristeva, which she carries out through a reading of Arendt's notion of narration, speech and action.

As my focus is here on Cavarero's and Kristeva's interpretations of Arendt, I will not evaluate their readings with regard to whether they are correct, flawed or even do justice to Arendt's original texts. My interest is rather in pointing out those textual passages where Cavarero's and Kristeva's paths of thinking *need* Arendt, either as an ally, or as an obstacle, in order to proceed with their feminist projects. For similar reasons, I term these readings "femininity interpretations" of Arendt's silence on gender. Although both Cavarero and Kristeva could also be theorized as poststructuralists, psychoanalytically oriented feminists, and sexual difference theorists, I do not examine and comment on their theoretical positions and life work at large, but focus instead on their responses to Arendt.

<sup>24</sup> *Matricide* originates in the Latin verb *matricidium* (mother-killing), which comes from *mater* (mother) and *caedere* (to slay). There is also an equivalent old English term *modorslaga* (mother-slayer).

### 3.1 Articulating a maternal ontology through Arendt

In the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt prepares the setting for her conception of political action by making an analogy between birth and action. For Arendt, action means the beginning of something new. In order to illustrate this quality of action, Arendt writes that each new birth of a child represents the potential for new, unique actions and deeds. "[A]ction has the closest connection with the human condition of *natality*; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is of acting" (HC, 9, my emphasis). Arendt thus points out that each new infant being born into this world is unique, like no one else before, and each one of us has the potential to take initiative and perform actions in a unique way. In other words, each person is a new beginning.

In this same context, Arendt links her conception of natality to the concepts of "plurality" as well as to spontaneity and unique distinctness. In other words, what makes new beginnings meaningful is that action always takes place in a world inhabited by others. Thus action is always *interaction*. To live is synonymous to being among other human beings "*inter homines esse*" and to die is synonymous with "'cease to be among men', *inter homines esse disenere*" (HC, 8). Although in *The Human Condition* Arendt traces the etymology of the concept of action to the Greek term *αρχεν* (*archein*, to begin) and the Roman equivalent *agere* (to set in motion), what is more important with regard to the concept of natality is that Arendt credits St. Augustine and not Aristotle as the philosopher of beginnings and claims that the idea of action *as* beginning something new, and thus also of natality, comes originally from St. Augustine (HC, 8, 177, 189).<sup>25</sup> Arendt's notion of natality thus actually originates from the Latin concept *initium*, which for St. Augustine means a specific kind of beginning, that is, the beginning of time and temporality in the world through the creation of man. St. Augustine is credited also on the very last pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt develops for the first time the political significance of natality (OT, 478-479). Hence, in a number of ways, natality is a performative concept which aims to disrupt totalitarian annihilation, both in theory and in practice:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only "message"

<sup>25</sup> In *The Human Condition*, Arendt traces the idea of action as beginning something new to the 12th book (chapter 20) of St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (*City of God*) and interprets it in a secular way as stating that what is unique about this type of a beginning is that it is "the beginning of somebody...who is a beginner himself" (HC, 8 fn1; HC 177 fn2). For an extensive analysis of Arendt's reading of St. Augustine, see Kampowski (2008) and Vatter (2006).

which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – "that a beginning be made man was created," said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.<sup>26</sup>

Adriana Cavarero interprets Arendt's conception of action as beginning through the philosophy of Luce Irigaray. Resembling Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*, 1949), Irigaray's central claim is that Woman has always been interpreted as the Other to the male subject, the "I." Thus Irigaray states prophetically that whereas for Martin Heidegger the fundamental question of his age was the question concerning the forgetting of being, *the* most important question of our age is the question concerning the forgetting of sexual difference. "Sexual difference is probably the issue of our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through" (Irigaray 1993, 5).

Throughout her work – for instance in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* – Irigaray reads the tradition of Western philosophy through the category of sexual difference. "Woman" is according to Irigaray always determined in relation to "Man," never independently, as an autonomous subject (Irigaray 1984/1993, 8-11; cf. Irigaray 1997/2001). This is because Western philosophical, political and religious thought as well as writing is grounded in the concept of *the* subject, which is treated as abstract and neutral. However, this concept, such as in the form "man" as a universal, is in fact sexed, and refers always to the male. Irigaray thus sets as her task to rewrite philosophy through the category of sexual difference, and by doing this she aims to take us to a new era of thinking. This task involves rethinking the most elementary categories of Western metaphysics, including those of space, time and matter.

Cavarero follows Irigaray's philosophical project and takes sexual difference as one of her two axes of interpretation. The other axis is Arendt's philosophy of natality. Writing about sexual difference and birth, Cavarero states:

Here the revolution in perspective is of a particularly female, feminine sort. It appears to the basic realism when a woman observes her individual

<sup>26</sup> Arendt's original footnote in the text refers here to the same book and chapter of *City of God* as in *The Human Condition*, namely Book 12, chapter 20. Although Arendt does not yet use the concept of "natality" in *The Origins*, it is clear that the conception of natality in *The Human Condition* is Arendt's political response to totalitarian annihilation and that the idea of action as beginning something new is developed already in *The Origins*. For more on the appearance of the concept "natality" in Arendt's thinking, see Vatter (2006) and Kampowski (2008).

embodiment [...] This name [*woman*] must resonate within the kind of symbolic order where birth, the act by which embodied individuals are born and actualized, will also restore meaning for everyone, female and male. Humans always come to this world in this way, never otherwise [...]. Here in the new philosophical horizon of sexual difference, the basic element of philosophy is a *two*, not a *one*. [...] All persons, male and female are inevitably born from their mother's womb as finite beings. In my desire to disinvest myself from the existing context, I found the second axis of my theoretical approach in Hannah Arendt's category of *birth*. [...] the central position of birth within her work brings about a subversive shift in perspective with regard to the patriarchal tradition that has always thrived on the category of death. (Cavarero 1990/1995, 6, italics in original)

We can see from the passage above how Arendt functions as a Trojan horse against the Western, patriarchal tradition of thinking. Birth, and its connection to the maternal carry according to Cavarero great potential for feminist thinking because, as an existential concept, natality ("being-from-birth"), problematizes traditional, male conceptualizations of human existence, such as Martin Heidegger's notion of "being-towards-death" (*Sein zum Tode*). Cavarero thus shares the Anglophone critique of patriarchy that Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981) and Brown (1988) promote. However, Cavarero diagnoses the problem of male domination as a philosophical, ontological question, not exclusively a socio-economic and political problem.

### ***Undoing matricide***

Cavarero's reconceptualization of human existence as originating in birth and the body of the mother provides her with a new, feminine way to think about corporeality, materiality and relationality. The mother-child relation provides an ontological foundation for a philosophy that begins with the inter-subjective relation between two. Furthermore, natality functions as the ontological foundation of plurality. The miraculous event of birth is the precondition for the appearing of new individuals, beginnings, actions and narrations in this world.

In order to articulate this feminine symbolic order, Cavarero elaborates on the metaphor of weaving. Her feminist task of rewriting history as a process, "embraces the gestures of other female weavers" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 8). The metaphor of weaving refers back to Homer's *The Odyssey*, in which the figure of Queen Penelope is described as weaving a cloth while waiting for Odysseus to return home. In order to keep competing suitors away,

each night Penelope undoes what she has weaved the day before. She tells her suitors, who assume Odysseus to be dead, that once she is finished with the cloth, she will choose a suitor and remarry. This never happens and Penelope is finally reunited with Odysseus. In her retelling of the story of Penelope, Cavarero describes Penelope in the weaving room after Odysseus's return, sharing her story with other female weavers. They laugh in amusement at Penelope's strategy of keeping the suitors away (Cavarero 1990/1995, 17-18; cf. Cavarero 2000, 59).

When Cavarero announces that her own method is related and indebted to Arendt's method, she is intertextually alluding to the process of dismantling and recontextualization that Arendt formulates in her last work, *The Life of the Mind*. In the first part of this trilogy, Arendt also refers to Penelope and elaborates that "...the business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before" (LM I, 77). The idea here is that thinking produces no tangible end results. Instead the products of thought must be spoken in words, or recorded in writing, which is not always an easy task. Let me elaborate on this connection briefly, since it is a significant element in Cavarero's interpretation.

In her last work, which is one of the few places where she explicitly reflects on her own philosophical way of thinking, Arendt claims that her aim is to show how our use of language and its concepts affect our philosophical thinking. In order to show this, she uses both grammatical and etymological analyses. Arendt stresses the importance of interpretation and narration as constitutive of contemporary philosophy and expresses skepticism towards projects that seek disclosure or an original beginning *ἀρχή* (*arche*) within history. For Arendt, history is a form of storytelling that consists of several different interpretations based on historical practices and events (HC, 273; BPF, 42-43). Arendt reflects on her own philosophical thinking and then clarifies her position in an often quoted passage:

I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. (LM I, 212)

For Arendt, so-called 'metaphysical fallacies' and erroneous strands of thought must not be denied, but neither can they be solved. Instead they must be located and exposed (LM II, 55; cf. Kristeva 1999/2001, 172; Taminioux 1997, 125, 140). The practice of dismantling thus focuses on the implicit presuppositions which philosophers inevitably make in their

research and thinking. Since thinking produces no tangible end products, not everything is recorded in the written texts. Equally important is to pay attention to what is left unsaid. By following the philosophical argumentation of a chosen philosopher or a chosen philosophical doctrine to its limits, Arendt claims to be able to reveal strands of thought that are not visible to the author. This opens up a space for a critical dialogue between the author and the reader.

Cavarero follows the Arendtian technique of dismantling and finds that ‘natality’ is a forgotten theme in the textual tradition of Western philosophy (Cavarero 1990/1995, 6-7):

In her work, she [Arendt] focuses on the site [birth] that the gaze of men has long sought to avoid for fear of staring death in the face as the yardstick of human existence. This anxiety is what gives rise to the symbolic event that constitutes the original act of matricide [the erasure of the Great Mother]. It is also the basis of the obsessive desire to endure, to survive, which leads men to entrust eternal objects of thought with the task of “saving” them from the selfsame death they chose as the locus of meaning when they decided, not by chance, to call themselves *mortals*. (ibid. 7, italics in original)

To clarify, for Cavarero, the study of metaphysics – from the Greek *τά μετά τά φυσικά* (*ta meta ta physica*, beyond physics) – isolates human existence from its origins in physical nature. She argues that from Parmenides on, true Being has been conceived as that which is everlasting and unchanging, while the cycle of life on the other hand has been degraded as belonging to the perishable and merely apparent world. Cavarero sees here the traces of “the original act of matricide,” in other words, the “erasure of the Great Mother.” Whereas Heidegger saw the forgetting of the meaning of being as the most important philosophical question of our time and whereas Irigaray translated Heidegger’s project in her own quest for the meaning of sexual difference, Cavarero argues that the forgetting of natality is the most important philosophical question to be inquired into.

For Cavarero, this erasure does not come without a price. The neglect of maternal embodiment as the site of life’s origin as well as the symbolic order, elevates death as the center of meaning. Now the soul is regarded as eternal and immortal, whereas the body, which is born out of a woman, is shunned as perishable as well as continuously and slowly dying, until it finally decomposes and vanishes back into nothingness. According

to Cavarero, the masculine obsession with death comes from the dread of death, which is so powerful that it can negate life.

### ***Sexed natality***

In her work *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminili nella filosofia antica (In Spite of Plato 1990/1995)*, Cavarero sets out to unravel the symbolic order that underlies Western metaphysics from Parmenides on. Whereas Irigaray commits herself to a feminist deconstruction of canonical philosophical texts, Cavarero focuses on figures in Ancient mythology. For both Irigaray and Cavarero, the Western tradition is characterized by a phallic, symbolic order, in which "[...] a male subject claiming to be neutral/universal declares his central position, disseminating a sense of the world cut to his own measure and revealed in his own mythic figures" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 2). Consequently, all feminine representations are a creation of the masculine and receive their meaning in relation to man as omnipotent and universal. Given this situation, mythic heroines that would express female subjectivity in an adequate way are non-existent.

Cavarero develops her position by asking what kind of possibilities for identification or illumination of "embodied existence as a woman" do figures such as Oedipus, Prometheus or Don Juan provide for women and the "female intellectual worker." She states then, that a woman asking this question always runs up against the image created by Man and can therefore only find "an essential image of otherness." This is because even figures such as Diotima and Penelope, for instance, are a creation and fantasy of male authors (ibid. 3). The attempt of trying to identify with these figures is pointless, claims Cavarero.

The condition for the possibility of this "patriarchal *basso continuo*" in the history of Western thought is, according to Cavarero, an "original act of erasure" of the culture of the archaic Great Mother, a maternal deity that represents feminine infinity as the origin of all life. This deity threatens the masculine fantasy of self-generation and eternity, since she establishes life's pre-condition of natality as a corporeal and sexed event. We are all born from the womb of a mother, who was also born from a mother, and who is as such part of an entire female genealogy. "[S]exual difference is a *fact* that marks humans from the outset, since one *always* enters the world as *either man or woman*" (ibid, 3, my emphasis). This maternal alternative to the patriarchal tradition is something that Cavarero wants to reawaken: "[m]y starting point is the feminine philosophy of our time that is founded on a maternal figure. From there we women search for, and ultimately find, the ancient figuration of the Mother surrounded by daughters and sisters" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 5). As for the Anglophone, early second wave

interpreters, ‘sisterhood’ thus functions as a symbol of kinship in Cavarero’s text.

In order to establish a connection between maternity and materiality, Cavarero engages in a kind of Heideggerian praxis of etymology by stating that the symbolic figure of the Great Mother is rooted in nature, in accordance with the Greek word φύσις (*physis*), which she takes to derive from the verb φύειν “*phyein*,” and which she translates as meaning “to be born” (Cavarero 1995, 57-9).<sup>27</sup> It goes without saying then, that in Cavarero’s “yearning for a radical, woman-centered definition of the human” (Braidotti, 1995, ix), *birth* is one of her most crucial conceptual tools, and it is here that Hannah Arendt’s philosophy enters the scene.

Cavarero is well aware that Arendt does not theorize birth “as coming from a mother’s womb.” Quite the contrary, in *The Human Condition* and in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt theorizes birth as being generated from nowhere: “In this world which we enter, *appearing from a nowhere*, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide” (LM I, 19, my emphasis). I want to highlight here that there is a notable difference between Arendt’s formulation of birth in relation to unique distinctness and Cavarero’s interpretation of these terms, and this is important for Cavarero. In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes that it is our “second birth” through speech and action, not our birth from the womb, which enables us to enact our individual distinctness:

Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes by which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects but *qua men* [*Mensch*].<sup>28</sup> With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion *is like a second birth*, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the *naked fact* of our *original physical* appearance. (HC, 176, my emphasis.)

On the contrary, for Cavarero already the “naked fact of our original physical appearance,”

<sup>27</sup> The original meaning of the term is actually not “to be born,” but “to grow.” The first occurrence of the term is in Homer’s *Odyssey*, referring to a plant. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger traces the etymology of the terms *phainesthai* and *phyein* as referring to the becoming of phenomena (Steiner 1999, 47-48). Cavarero seems to follow Heidegger here, whereas Arendt does not in fact follow Heidegger in her formulation of natality. For Heidegger and Arendt on birth, see Vatter 2006, 138-139.

<sup>28</sup> In German, “Mensch” refers to all genders, whereas the English “men” can mean either human beings in general, or men as in males. According to Jerome Kohn, Arendt uses the term Mensch to designate the gender neutral use of the term.



makes us unique and distinct. The silence on gender leads Arendt to theorize also birth without conceptually relating the event to sexual difference, motherhood and the feminine. However, through Irigaray's framework of sexual difference, Arendt's concept of natality can according to Cavarero be interpreted so that it refers back to the original act of birth from the womb of the mother: "[...]in its singularity the newborn is a 'beginning' found already 'started' inside the mother: it is generated by the female who has been generated by a m/other, and so ad infinitum in a sequence (theoria) of past mothers" (Cavarero 1990/1995, 82). Natality as a new beginning is thus begun already before the event of actual birth giving. In *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione (Relating Narratives 1997/2000)*, Cavarero elaborates further on her Irigarayan reading of Arendt's natality:

The newborn – unique and immediately expressive in the fragile totality of her exposure – has her unity precisely in this totally nude self-exposure. This unity is already a physical identity, visibly sexed, and even more perfect in so far as she is not yet qualifiable. (Cavarero 1997/2000, 38)

Cavarero shares the common feminist concern according to which Arendt's rigid distinctions risk excluding women from the political sphere altogether. By interpreting the event of physical birth as always and already indicating uniqueness and distinctness, Cavarero aims to develop Arendt's notions of "speech" and "action" in ways that expand our understanding of the political. The central task of *Relating Narratives* is to locate and understand forms of narration that have traditionally been excluded from what is conceived of as the political realm, and see that these narrations can be conceived to be political. An example is the self-narration of women in households, such as in the story of Penelope. Cavarero argues that when the disclosure of uniqueness and distinctness is theorized as a necessary element of birth, then the disclosure of the "who" is not an event exclusive to the public realm of speech and action. As Cavarero understands self-narration to be a deeply unique and personal form of disclosure, the personal can according to her be understood as having political significance.

Throughout her reading, Cavarero operates with fairly straightforward notions of femininity and masculinity as each other's polar opposites. Femininity is here associated with embodiment, birth, finitude and materiality, whereas masculinity is seen as resting on notions of heroism, risk, dominance, omnipotence and violence. Although Cavarero's understanding of femininity is specific to her own maternalist, philosophical project, she understands masculinity in a very similar way to the Anglophone, early

second wave theorists that I discussed in Part I. Cavarero argues, for instance, that epic drama (one of her favorite literary genres) presents masculinity as being constructed through the heroic male figure, who defies death by risking his life for his cause, such as the life of the city. For Cavarero, this is the main narrative format of all war stories and histories of great battles. In this type of format for writing history, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to envision feminine narratives of agency (ibid, 23-24).

In order to fill the void in history, and reverse matricide, Cavarero confronts the patriarchal, symbolic order by restoring the meaning of human existence as first and foremost natal and sexed. However, unlike Irigaray, Cavarero is not interested in establishing an ontology based on an amorous and/or erotic relationality between the feminine and the masculine (e.g. Irigaray 1984/1993; 1997/2001 and 1994/2001). Instead she places the mother-child relation as the basis of her ontology of sexual difference. This relation also functions as the ontological threshold towards theorizing a new feminine and maternal philosophy of voice. I will return to this theme in the last chapter of this Part, since Cavarero's philosophy of voice directly confronts Kristeva's Lacanian-inspired philosophy of the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" as well as her psychoanalytic theorization of matricide.

I will next discuss Kristeva's response to Arendt's lack of a theory of gender and sexuality. On the surface, Kristeva's reading resembles Cavarero's interpretation in many ways. Natality, the maternal, the material as well as the valuing of a life-centered philosophy over death, are also crucial to Kristeva's reading of Arendt. However, upon closer examination it becomes evident that Kristeva often uses these terms in an opposite way to Cavarero. She, for instance, regards matricide as a necessary element of subject formation and holds natality to be inherently violent. Most importantly, Kristeva's relationship to feminist theory is highly ambivalent, whereas Cavarero clearly self-identifies as a feminist philosopher. In Kristeva's reading, Arendt becomes an ally both for criticizing standpoint feminism as well as for articulating a radically feminine, political conception of birth.

### 3.2 Ambivalent feminisms

Arendt famously dismisses psychoanalysis with a shrug and a raise of the eyebrows so to speak. In *The Life of the Mind*, for instance, she writes:

Psychology, depth psychology or psychoanalysis, discovers no more than the ever-changing moods, the ups and downs of our psychic life, and its results are neither particularly appealing nor very meaningful in themselves. (LMI, 35)

Later on in the text, she rejects psychoanalysis for "[t]he monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the findings of modern psychology" (ibid.) For Arendt, psychoanalysis, with its focus on the individual, is a bourgeois and deterministic theory of the self, which takes its own theory as an unquestioned, absolute standard for what is normal. Nevertheless, despite her distaste towards psychoanalysis as well as her reluctance to theorize gender, Arendt's thinking has had a significant influence on Julia Kristeva's formulation of the female genius (*le génie féminine*) (cf. Kristeva 2006; Schippers 2011, 115-118). What is particularly interesting in this intellectual engagement is the fact that Kristeva clarifies her own theoretical relation to feminism and femininity (*le féminin*) through a psychoanalytically motivated reading of Arendt, who did not theorize gender, and whom Kristeva does not even regard as a feminist in the first place. Kristeva's interpretation of Arendt hence discloses her own complex relationship to feminist theory.

Despite their opposing views on psychoanalysis, Arendt and Kristeva share a high degree of skepticism towards identity politics as well as ideology-based political movements. Feminism, regardless of its heterogeneity and diversity, is not spared from this distrust. As Kristeva recalls in her speech upon receiving the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought in 2006:

[...] very early on I felt a great mistrust of the *hidden totalitarian tendencies of certain liberation movements* of our own democracies – even feminism [...]. Hannah Arendt's name immediately came to mind for my trilogy *Feminine Genius [Le Génie féminin]*, as my ambition here was to dissociate myself from *mass feminism* and pay tribute to *feminine creativity*. (Kristeva 2006, emphasis added)

Kristeva takes Arendt's silence on gender as her guiding point for criticizing those types of

feminist political organizing that are based on a unified notion of "women" as the political subject. She calls this "mass feminism." In her reading of Arendt, Kristeva takes Arendt to be critical precisely of this type of feminism. Hence, in order to decipher Arendt's reluctance to theorize gender, Kristeva pays attention to the question of what type of feminist political organizing was Arendt critical of.

Both in the introduction and in the conclusion to her trilogy on Melanie Klein, Arendt and Colette, Kristeva warns of a potential, totalitarian threat within feminism:

Today, we know too well the dead end to which these totalizing and totalitarian promises lead. Feminism itself, whatever various currents may exist in Europe and America, has not escaped this tendency. As a result, it has hardened into an inconsequential form of political activism that, ignorant of the uniqueness of individual subjects, believes that it can compass all womankind, like the proletariat, or the entire Third World, within a set of demands that are as passionate as they are desperate. (Kristeva 2004, 495)

Kristeva claims that feminism, as an ideological 'mass' movement, regardless of historical and cultural contexts, reduces unique and distinct individuals to a category of "women," thus suffocating both the internal differences within this group category as well as the possibility of theorizing sexual difference (Kristeva 2004, 493-494; Ziarek 2008, 5). Quoting Arendt, according to whom "[p]lurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody will ever be the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (HC, 8; Kristeva 1999/2001, 184), Kristeva explains that her ongoing struggle with feminism is the following question: "...how to preserve each woman's uniqueness within the plurality of the group?" (ibid.). This question is by no means unique to Kristeva. Theorists that I will examine in Part III of this study, such as Amy Allen (1999), see the question of how to establish political solidarity across differences as one of the most significant questions for feminist political theorizing. Yet, Kristeva seems to hold that *feminism* is a unified movement with a clear and uncontested ideological stance.

Due to her strongly worded antagonism towards *feminism*, Kristeva's – just like Arendt's – position among feminist theory is heatedly debated, to say the least. I quote Birgit Schippers at length to clarify my comparison:

[I]t is fair to say that few other thinkers are as contested within feminism

as Kristeva. Described by some of her critics as *anti-feminist* (Jones 1984: 56), unuseful for a feminist project (Fraser 1992, 189), *misogynistic* and even proto-fascist (J. Stone 1983), she is celebrated by others as a ‘brilliant feminist voice’ (Zerilli 1992; see also Ziarek 1992; 201) [...] [Kristeva’s] *ambivalence* towards feminism [...] ranges from a recognition of the importance of feminism’s achievements, to a reluctance to subscribe to a feminist perspective (see Lechte and Margaroni 2004: 24), up to an occasional outright rejection of feminism as totalitarian. (Schippers 2011, 2. my emphasis)

### *The genius of femininity*

What does Kristeva mean when she juxtaposes “mass feminism” with “feminine creativity,” and why does she consider Arendt a feminine genius? For Kristeva, genius is linked with singularity and particularity in a substantial way. She contends that this characteristic in the female genius’s work is like “[...] music composed of singularities, dissonant keys, counterpoints that go beyond the fundamental tonalities” (Kristeva 1999/2001, xxi). I interpret Kristeva’s choice of words here as an implicit, intertextual reference to Arendt, who in the preface to the second edition of *Between Past and Future*, writes that the essays in the book are “not the unity of a whole, but of a sequence of movements which, as in a musical suite, are written in the same or related keys. The sequence itself is determined by its content” (BPF, 14-15). In fact, almost all of Arendt’s books are rewritten texts composed of earlier, public lectures and essays printed in journals (Kohn 1994, xiii).

What this particular style means for Kristeva is that the genius exemplifies someone who stands out as unique and distinct from everyone else and whose life and work is entangled in an inseparable way. Melanie Klein, Arendt and Colette exemplify for Kristeva three extraordinary women, who in their own ways challenged the cultural, social and historical contexts of their own identities as women. “Arendt, Klein and Colette – and many others – did not wait for the ‘feminine condition’ to be ripe in order to exercise their freedom. Is not genius precisely the breakthrough that consists in going beyond the situation?” (Kristeva 1999/2001, 496; cf. Kristeva 2004, 504).

Kristeva is fascinated with what she calls the genius’s originality, creativity and passion for life, because in her view, it compels us to discuss not only the genius’s works, but her unique life story as well. In other words, as for Cavarero, life, thought and narrative are connected. According to Kristeva, it is life’s unique and singular raw experiences that

constitute the ethical motivation for creativity and revolt towards previous ways of thinking that we can witness in the genius (Kristeva 1999/2001, xiv). This view builds heavily on Kristeva's own psychoanalytic notion of the singularity and particularity of the feminine, in opposition to universal phallic monism.

Arendt's genius is, according to Kristeva, the articulation of a new concept through which to think about politics in the midst of a Europe darkened by fascism and genocide. Kristeva holds that in these extreme conditions of horror, Arendt, through her concept of natality, theorized freedom and new beginnings in a way that linked politics to "birth," "life," "desire" and "motherhood." Thus, not only did Arendt revolutionize the way in which we conceive totalitarianism, but she also launched a new, life-affirming concept of politics by grounding it in natality:

In the shadows of the Holocaust it is worth noting that it was a woman, a Jewish woman, Hannah Arendt, who took the initiative in reopening the question of birth by breathing new meaning into the freedom of being. And therein lies her genius, whose very core touches on the crisis of modern culture along with its ultimate fate of life and death. (Kristeva 1999/2001, 48)

I want to stress that again, the importance here lies in the singularity and particularity associated with the concept of natality (Kristeva 1999/2001, 46-47). Hence, through Arendt, Kristeva is also able to theorize motherhood as an expression of genius, in other words, as an expression of female singularity (Kristeva 1999/2001, xv). The event of birth is always a singular and unique event through which a new life begins and this relationship between the mother and the child is absolutely singular and unique (ibid. 46-47).

In order to shed light on the question between the interrelatedness of genius, femininity and natality in Kristeva's reading of Arendt, a few points regarding Kristeva's overall theory of subject-formation and the gendered aspects of language-acquisition in particular are in need of clarification. Kristeva's conception of "female genius" is in important ways embedded in her notions of the "semiotic" and the "symbolic" as well as her conception of femininity's poetic, revolutionary potential. I turn to these themes next to examine Kristeva's political formulation of matricide and contrast her reading with Cavarero's critique of the distinction between "the semiotic" and "the symbolic." With her critique, Cavarero radicalizes Kristeva's notion of "the semiotic" through a creative development of Arendt's conception of speech and action.

#### 4. Resisting the politics of death

In the following two chapters, I will outline Kristeva's response to Arendt's silence on gender. I argue that whereas Cavarero is highly critical of Lacanian phallogentrism and its intrusion into the relationship between the mother and the child in particular, Kristeva accepts the doctrine of psychical matricide as an essential step in subject formation: "[f]or man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic *necessity*, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* of our individuation" (Kristeva 1987/1989, 38, italics added). Hence, natality in Kristeva's context means both the actual, physical birth of an infant, as well as the "second" birth through which an infant enters language, and becomes an individual subject. This doubling of birth is one of the most crucial aspects of Kristeva's understanding of Arendtian natality.

Kristeva builds here on the originally Freudian idea that in order for a child to develop into a person with a full sense of self-awareness, it has to go through various libidinal and sexual developmental stages (e.g. Kristeva 2004, 497-498). Kristeva uses the term "semiotic" for that aspect of language, and that developmental stage, which she takes to refer to the affective, the particular, singular, maternal and feminine, in other words to the pre-linguistic and symbiotic phase in which an infant is entirely dependent on the mother's care. Following Jacques Lacan,<sup>29</sup> Kristeva takes the term "symbolic" to designate the universal, paternal and masculine order, in other words, the linguistic and social sphere that is grammatically coherent and structured.

Contrary to Lacan, however, Kristeva emphasizes the mother's irreplaceable role in language acquisition and psycho-social development. This is because Kristeva grounds her psychoanalytic theory in her conception of the subject, which is always in a state of becoming. This subject lives in a complex, linguistic network, always in relation to other speaking subjects. Hence *the* subject is never fixed permanently.

I will argue that many feminist theorists are uncomfortable with Kristeva's thinking due to the fact that she follows Lacan's phallic hegemony to a great extent in order to account for how an infant acquires language and in other words, enters the symbolic order. Contrary to Cavarero, Kristeva holds that the figure of the father is necessary for breaking the symbiotic bond between the mother and the child. What does this violent break between

<sup>29</sup> See particularly Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*. 1966/2002.

the mother and the infant mean, and why is it necessary? Furthermore, how does it inform Kristeva's interpretation of Arendt's conception of natality and gender? I will turn to these questions next.

#### 4.1 Abjection and the generative violence of new beginnings

In her 1980s works *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1980/1982) and *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (*Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, 1987/1989), Kristeva theorizes the process through which a subject comes to be and how the boundaries between self and other are constituted.

When I am beset by *abjection*, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-ject, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. (Kristeva 1980/1982, 1, my emphasis)

The "abject" is thus neither the subject nor the object, but something that exists in between, something that threatens the boundaries of the self. Yet the self cannot be constituted without the abject, namely that which it is not. It must reject the abject in order to constitute itself as a unified subject. According to Kristeva, abjection signifies this ambiguous process of rejection. The subject is constituted through an ambivalent balance between prohibition and desire. In the earliest stages of childhood, it is the affective attraction and repulsion towards the mother's body. Hence, before language and law, the newborn infant is in a symbiotic union with the mother's body and thus the mother's breast, for instance, constitutes for the infant an element of its own world. This world is what Kristeva calls the "chora." In this pre-objectual and pre-subjective stage, there is no separation between affects, such as hunger, and its object and thus no boundaries between the self and the other (Kristeva 1980/1982, 1-3; Moruzzi 2000, 21; Zerilli 1995, 177).

According to Kristeva, the infant begins to form a sense of itself as separate from its mother through slowly abjecting itself. It spits out, or bites the breast and rejects a hug for instance. It plays with its own excrement and vomit, both something that are the first products of its own, distinct body. What is crucial in Kristeva's framework is that the mother's body is



not repressed, but constitutes instead a continuous element in the horizon of the psyche. It signifies a fundamental loss at the heart of the subject, namely, the loss of the original symbiosis with the chora. This is why Kristeva, in complete contrast to both Cavarero and Arendt, holds natality to be fundamentally violent. The separation from the mother and the assertion of the "I" is an act of aggression, hence the term "matricide" (killing one's own mother). Later, in adult life, the mother's body comes to represent everything associated with physical dependency, necessity and animality, all of which have been abjected through the "incest taboo." By following through Kristeva's formulation of matricide in this way, it becomes evident that Kristeva's and Cavarero's conceptions of the meaning of matricide and natality are radically different (e.g. Kristeva 1980/1982, 13). This further strengthens my argument in this part, according to which feminist theorists operating with similar concepts, use them in very different ways and for highly differing purposes.

For Kristeva, the maternal represents an ongoing threat to the psyche's boundaries. As Noëlle McAfee explains: "[...] what the child abjects is not gone once and for all. The abject continues to haunt the subject's consciousness, remaining on the periphery of awareness. The subject finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained" (McAfee 2004, 49-50; cf. Stone 2012, 123).

Now, the reason why Kristeva's theory of abjection is important for understanding her interpretation of Arendt's silence on gender as well as Arendt's concept of natality, is that Kristeva does not limit the application of her own theory to psychoanalytic developmental psychology alone. In her original way, she interprets also political and social phenomena, such as fascism through her psychoanalytic framework of "natality," "abjection" and "matricide." It is here that Kristeva's interpretation of Arendt's conception of natality becomes unique in the context of the tradition of feminist Arendt scholarship. The absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's thinking enables Kristeva to pick out natality as the most feminine of Arendt's concepts, and then formulate her own critique of the thanatopolitical foundations of Western rationality.

In contrast to Cavarero then, Kristeva argues that although Arendt's philosophical formulation of natality as a political concept manages to disrupt Western philosophy's anxiety caused by the fear of death, Arendt nevertheless makes the mistake of grounding politics in pleasure, neglecting the violent and sadomasochistic aspects of politics. This is because in Kristeva's view Arendt discusses only the pleasurable aspects of speech, action and appearing with others. She neglects the negative aspect of political action,

namely the desire to dominate others (Kristeva 1999/2001, 180-181). In a tone resembling Thomas Hobbes's in *Leviathan*, Kristeva suggests that fear, not pleasure lies at the root of political relations and only if we can give an account of fear and dominance can we understand how politics can take violent forms, in the worst case fascism and totalitarianism (Kristeva, 1999/2001, 180-81). In order to theorize fear, Kristeva elaborates on the political implications of abjection and matricide.

#### **4.2 From failed matricide to totalitarian horror**

Nativity as a political concept, as well as Arendt's philosophical defense of the significance of life, is for Kristeva a response to totalitarian regimes and death camps in particular. With *The Origins of Totalitarianism* the question of life becomes according to Kristeva the main guiding thread in Arendt's entire oeuvre.

[T]he theme of life guides [Arendt's] thinking throughout all her writings, growing in purity and structure as it intersperses political history with metaphysical history. It underlines her thought process as she establishes with great intellectual fortitude – in a move that would prove eminently controversial – that Nazism and Stalinism are two sides of the same horror, totalitarianism, because they both partake in the same *denial of life*. (Kristeva 1999/2001, 4, my emphasis)

Kristeva takes this denial of life to be fundamentally linked to the denial of the original act of matricide and hence also to the denial of femininity and the maternal. She holds that despite Arendt's ingenious way of theorizing totalitarianism, Arendt's incapability to see the sadomasochistic interplay between the death drive and the life drive, underlying *all* human relations, has its roots in Arendt's incapability to theorize nativity as an embodied, sexed and maternal event, as well as her refusal to acknowledge the body as *politically* significant (ibid.). Hence, the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's thinking has according to Kristeva implications that go beyond feminist theorizing. Her silence on gender affects the accuracy of her theorization of modern Western political history in general. Although this critique may sound like it bears resemblance to the early second wave Anglophone critiques of Arendt's neglect of the body (see chapter 1 above), Kristeva's framing is unique due to its psychoanalytical underpinnings:

Arendt often returns to the theme of an objectless, exclusively corporeal, and *incommunicable* pain. Showing the signs of melancholic experience,

such a pain is dissociated from any communicable sexualization and from any possible seduction that might have insinuated themselves in, say, sadomasochism. (Kristeva 1999/2001, 178, italics added)

What the citation above means according to Kristeva, is that Arendt is incapable of giving an account of the body *as* gendered and *as* political. The only way Arendt can discuss it is through the example of an experience of pain without an object, which is a melancholic experience. Thus, for Kristeva, Arendt's way of relating to the body is melancholic. The key here is to understand Kristeva's emphasis on the maternal and the thesis put forth also by Cavarero, namely, that birth is always an embodied and sexed event. It is always birth from the mother's body. According to Kristeva, Arendt does not realize that *both* anxiety and gratitude for life are aspects of natality. Anxiety is related to life as being-towards-death, and thus to life as a complex interplay of the sadomasochistic dynamic of the life and death drives (Kristeva 2004, 86). Kristeva argues that on the other hand gratitude, as Arendt points out, comes from the fact of having been born and having been given the gift of life. As I have argued above, birth – the beginning of someone new – is in Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework a fundamentally violent and painful event, because in the event of birth, two bodies literally become separated from each other, so that a new life can begin. Yet, Arendt does not theorize the dramatic and painful aspect of birth.

Kristeva pays close attention to two different aspects of natality in Arendt's philosophy. She highlights the fact that Arendt theorizes speech and action as a "second birth," thereby making a distinction between what Kristeva calls "linguistic natality" (the entering into the realm of the symbolic) and the bare nakedness of our physical being. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Cavarero also comments on this distinction and counters Arendt by arguing that through sexual difference, our naked physical appearance already signifies uniqueness and distinctness. For clarity's sake, I will quote again here the passage from *The Human Condition* that Cavarero and Kristeva both comment on:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like *a second birth*, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the *naked fact* of our *original physical* appearance. (HC, 176-177, emphasis added)

The passage above is interpreted by Kristeva as an overtly rigid separation between the semiotic and the symbolic. Contrary to Arendt, for Kristeva, linguistic natality is not something "secondary" and inseparable from "primary," embodied natality. Instead,

Kristeva argues that due to Arendt's dismissal of psychoanalysis, and hence her lack of a psychoanalytic anthropology, she fails to see how violence figures as an element in all psychic relations (Kristeva 1999/2001, 129). Failure to acknowledge the necessity of the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic, as well as the maternal and the abject, leads, according to Kristeva, to a repression of the painful aspect of natality, in other words, a repression of matricide. This repression will further lead to melancholia.

From within a psychoanalytic framework then, Kristeva's reading is original and insightful because she develops psychoanalytic theory towards political philosophy through a reading of Arendt and Melanie Klein. Peg Birmingham, for instance, writes that:

Kristeva provides a much-needed supplement to Arendt's understanding of the event of natality, that allows us to see the ambiguous and fragile status of this event, out of which arises the predicament of common responsibility. The frailty of human affairs arises out of the abjection of primary natality, an abjection that means we must face the ever-present threat of the banality of radical evil, which can be traced to a radical abandonment – a desolation inherent in embodiment itself. (Birmingham 2006, 122)

Again, we have to keep in mind Kristeva's conception of matricide, according to which Western thought is designated by its incapability to deal with the maternal. This is where Kristeva and Cavarero share common ground. However, whereas Cavarero is more concerned with the genealogy of the maternal in ancient mythology and Western philosophy, Kristeva's elaboration on natality is more radically political. According to Kristeva, fascism is just as much an expression of the inability to mourn the original loss inherent in natality as it is a desperate attempt to aggressively replace the symbolic with a new, narcissistic order. Although the details of Kristeva's account of fascism are complex, the basic idea is simple to grasp, because it is precisely the logic of abjection that is in play here. I will elaborate on Kristeva's account of fascism briefly, because I want to highlight how differently Kristeva and Cavarero operate with the concepts of "natality" and "life."

Kristeva argues that fascism is a culturally and historically precise response to the loss of foundations traditionally provided by religion. Modernity marks for her a historical period in which political foundations collapse due to the collapse of religious authority and law. Hence, the void left by the lack of foundations attracts various totalitarian ideologies. What is specific to fascism is that it functions according to the logic of abjection. The phobia inherent in fascism is in fact an extreme form of fascination and obsession in disguise

(Kristeva 1999/2001, 138). Peg Birmingham illuminates this process by claiming that "[...] the phobic subject regresses to the narcissistic fantasy of fusion with the maternal body [...]. This phobic fantasy then constructs an imaginary other who becomes the metaphor for the subject's own aggression. Insofar as the phobic fantasy is always culturally and historically specific, fascist regimes are able to mobilize these phobic fantasies and bring them on the social body" (Birmingham 2006, 120-21). Hence, the first step of anti-Semitism was to assimilate the Jews, and only then to annihilate them.

Kristeva also interprets Arendt's lengthy analysis of the history of anti-Semitism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* through a psychoanalytic framework, which draws from Kristeva's presentation of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's engagement with fascism (*The Powers of Horror*). This reading leads to an account of totalitarianism as a cancerous, parareligious, narcissist ideology that assimilates every difference into itself before annihilating them all (Kristeva 1999/2001, 128-29). In Kristeva's psychoanalytic framework, this process is the result of the failure to give an account of the original wound in the heart of the subject, namely, the wound caused by natality and matricide. Failure to carry out matricide, and failure to understand abjection thus leads to the substitution of the phallic law with an imaginary, delirious fantasy of omnipotence, in other words, totalitarian law.

What is striking in Kristeva's reading is that she regards fascism as a result of a fundamental neglect of the maternal, in other words a neglect of gender. She also diagnoses a neglect of gender in the thinking of Hannah Arendt, who was *the* theorist of totalitarianism.

How then do we make sense of Kristeva's claim that feminism as a mass movement has totalitarian tendencies? If totalitarianism is inherently narcissistic and mass feminism is potentially totalitarian, then does feminism follow a narcissistic logic, which only the particularity and singularity of a genius can interrupt? I suggest that Arendt's reluctance to theorize or join the women's movement paradoxically signifies for Kristeva a heroic act of the display of feminine uniqueness and distinctness. Even though Arendt, in Kristeva's psychoanalytic framing, failed to theorize matricide, she was nevertheless able to articulate in language a feminine philosophy of giving life, in other words, the maternal. In this same framework those types of feminist identity-politics that are based on a unified notion of "woman," on the other hand, fail to express singularity in language. Like the melancholic, who is incapable of accounting for the original loss inherent in the transfer from pre-linguistic to linguistic subjectivity, so too Kristeva's ideal type of a standpoint feminist is incapable of theorizing separateness and distinctness between women.

Taken together, these aspects of Kristeva's account of matricide as well as her theorization of the political implications of the failure to account for matricide clearly separates her from Cavarero, for whom matricide is historically contingent and can and should be reversed.

In two chapters, titled "The Maternal *Chora*; or The Voice of the Poetic Text" and "A Vocal Ontology of Uniqueness" in *For More than One Voice (A piu voci: Per una filosofia dell' espressione vocale, 2003)*, Cavarero both elaborates on Kristeva's psychoanalytic theorization of the semiotic as well as distances herself from Kristeva. Contrary to Kristeva, for Cavarero, voice and language are theorized as being intimately connected. This means that the relationship between the mother and the child does *not* need to be broken through psychic matricide in order for the infant to enter into the realm of the symbolic, the social and language. The development is more gradual. Commenting on Kristeva, Cavarero affirms some of her key ideas:

[T]he "semiotic *chora*": [is for Kristeva] the preverbal and unconscious sphere, not yet inhabited by the law of the sign, where rhythmic and vocalic drives reign. This semiotic *chora* has a profound bodily root and is linked to the indistinct totality of mother and child. It precedes the symbolic system of language, or the sphere of the semantic where syntax and the concept rule – the paternal order of separation between the self and the other, between mother and child, and between signifier and signified. (Cavarero 2003/2005, 133)

Cavarero affirms Kristeva's notion of the *chora*. However, due to their different readings of Arendt's conception of natality and uniqueness, Cavarero claims that "before communicating 'merely something – thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear', the human voice communicates itself, its uniqueness. Without this communication, the scene of infancy and the relation of the infant to the mother is reduced to a mere semiosis of needs" (Cavarero 2003/2005, 181; cf. HC, 176). By elaborating on Arendt, Cavarero questions psychoanalytic theories according to which the vocal utterings of a baby, as something oral, belong to the *mere* "semiotic," pre-linguistic realm. Because Cavarero theorizes sexual difference, uniqueness and distinctness as an inherent aspect of the event of physical birth, the shift from oral vocalizations to speech is gradual in her philosophy. I will quote Cavarero at length in order to clarify her conception of the uniqueness and distinctness of the voice:

Already in utero, an internal musicality wraps the unborn in the rhythms of the maternal body; it envelops the baby in its sonorous texture [...] Precisely because the mother [not the father] gives language to the infant, there is no rupture between this music and speech. The lullaby, or the song of words that rocks the baby to sleep with rhythmical movements, is perhaps the clearest example of the absence of such a rupture [...] The maternal figure is precisely the conduit that, in all our lives, embodies this link – to which, as it were, metaphysics reacts in the name of the father. She is voice *and* speech; or better, she is the originary sense of voice, insofar as the voice is destined to give speech its essential sense. Instead of transmitting speech as something that can be taught and learned – a system, a language – the maternal voice transmits to speech the primary sense of the vocalic, the sonorous self-expression of *uniqueness* and relation, the self-invocation of embodied singularities through spontaneous resonance. This resonance, begun by the duet between mother and infant, is not simply music – it is *the* music of speech, the specific mode for which speech sings musically. (Cavarero 2003/2005, 179-180, emphasis in the original)

Arendt's notion of natality, speech and action and their relation to unique distinctness are thus quite literary *fleshed* out by Cavarero. Unlike for Kristeva, language is here not theorized exclusively as text. Instead, Cavarero emphasizes the maternal and material element at the root of all human communication, including the self-expression of infants. As I have argued above, in order to carry out her philosophical project that radicalizes Kristeva's notion of the "semiotic" and "the chora," Cavarero utilizes Arendt. Hence, even though Arendt never theorized natality as sexed or even maternal, her philosophy of natality becomes the bedrock for Cavarero's and Kristeva's feminist projects.

To conclude, my discussion in this part seeks to establish that in contrast to the Anglophone theorists who widely theorize Arendt either as an anti-feminist or a proto-feminist, to a large extent Cavarero and Kristeva focus particularly on "natality," "birth," "life," "the feminine" and "the maternal" and both construct Arendt as a *female* philosopher with a uniquely *feminine* textual style. The lack of a theory of gender and sexuality in Arendt's oeuvre does not constitute an obstacle for their theorizations of the feminine and the maternal. Instead, both see Arendt as a female writer, despite her silence on gender. On the other hand, as I have argued, *despite* the seeming similarities in their projects, as well as in their responses to Arendt's silence on gender, Cavarero and Kristeva come to very different conclusions regarding the meaning of Arendt's notion of natality. Whereas

Cavarero's project is normative and seeks to establish natality as *the* concept through which the tradition of Western philosophy can be reframed into a feminine and maternal path of thinking and speaking, Kristeva's psychoanalytical framework establishes natality as an inherently violent concept. For Kristeva, "abjection" and "matricide" are needed to complement Arendt's theory of natality if we want to correctly understand the logic of totalitarianism as an inherently gendered form of violence.

I next turn back to Anglophone debates from the 1990s. I have dealt briefly with postmodern reading strategies already in Part I. In the context of that discussion, I deliberately narrowed my focus to those feminist responses that were concerned with Arendt's conception of the body, because my aim was to show that Arendt's enigmatic notion of the body can be used as a guiding point for understanding some of the most crucial differences between feminist readings of Arendt from the 1970s-1980s, and those beginning to take place during the early 1990s. In Part III, that follows next, I will reopen this discussion and deepen my focus in order to clarify and strengthen the main argument of this study, namely that feminist interpretations of Arendt can best be understood by arranging them into three distinct responses to the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's oeuvre.

Whereas Honig (1995), Dietz (1995), Young-Bruehl (1996) and Maslin (2013) all detect a paradigm shift taking place in feminist Arendt receptions in the 1990s, I conceive this history as more nuanced, complex and polyphonic. I problematize and complicate the framings of Honig (1995), Dietz (1995), Young-Bruehl (1996) and Maslin (2013) in Part III by returning once more to the theme of Arendt as a masculine Grecophile. I will bring a marginal but growing reading trend of gay studies and queer interpretations of Arendt into my discussion on feminist responses to Arendt. I will argue that this reading trend branches off from postmodern feminist readings. Through an examination of Morris B. Kaplan's (1997) and Didier Eribon's (1999) readings in particular, I demonstrate how the rise of critical masculinity studies and studies on male homosociality during the shift from the 1980s to the 1990s complicate normative and conservative notions of masculinity and therefore also of femininity as incompatible with being male (e.g. Sedgwick 1990). For Eribon and Kaplan, Arendt's silence on gender functions as a motivational ground for theorizing rejected notions of masculinity, such as Jewish and gay men as "effeminate men."

Finally, towards the end of Part III, I will contrast Mario Feit's interpretation of Arendt as a critic of heteronormativity with Kristeva's and Cavarero's readings of natality. By making



this comparison, I clarify the ways in which Arendtian concepts such as “natality,” “action” and “new beginnings” are circulated and brought into yet new contexts and framings. Part III as a whole thus adds another layer to the history of responses to Arendt’s silence on gender.



**Part III**  
**The rebel**

## 5. Agonism and Performativity

Postmodern, feminist Arendt receptions, Bonnie Honig (1988, 1993, 1995) most notably, draw from the notion of language as a site for resignification, reiteration and circulation of meanings. I argue that this notion of language was originally adopted into Anglophone, feminist Arendt scholarship through the influence of French, poststructuralist Arendt receptions, and through such pioneering new works on gender and sexuality as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

To be more precise, in 1983 Paul Ricouer, who knew Arendt in person, translated *The Human Condition* into French, and wrote an extensive preface to the book. As Dana R. Villa (1992) recalls, theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979/1984), Phillipe Lacou-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1983), had also discovered Arendt and questioned interpretations that saw an affinity between Arendt's conception of speech and action and Habermas's theory of communicative action (Villa 1992; Fraser 1984, 145-148; cf. Taminioux 1992/1997; Forti 2006). By the 1990s, feminist interpreters in Anglophone academia had begun to explore poststructuralist readings of Arendt. Aligning Arendt with Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Honig was the first theorist to frame Arendt as an agonistic rebel and a theorist of performativity. What I find notable is that although Honig elaborates on poststructuralist theorizing, such as the works of male authors like Jacques Derrida, she neither refers to, nor elaborates on French feminist poststructuralists in her work. The same applies to Allen (1999).

In the following, I will argue that through Bonnie Honig's *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), Arendt became widely recognized as an agonistic thinker, who highlights pluralist perspectives, unique distinctness, performativity of speech and action as well as constituent power and contingent political foundations. This new paradigm is visible in the editor's introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995), which was the first essay anthology on Arendt's complex relation to feminist theorizing.

Rather than treat male and female or masculine and feminine as categories that organize uniformed and already gendered artifacts, *new theorists of gender* argue that the categories themselves help to produce and reinforce the very uniformities they claim to describe. These developments have prompted a reconsideration of Arendt that includes a critical reevaluation

of earlier feminist judgments of her work. From feminist perspectives that interrogate, politicize, and historicize – rather than simply redeploy – categories like “woman” “identity,” or “experience,” Arendt’s hostility to feminism and her critical stance towards identitarian and essentialist definitions of “woman” begin to look more like an advantage than a liability. (Honig 1995, 2-3, my emphasis.)

In this historical context, also Dietz (1993, 1995), Disch (1995), Zerilli (1995) and Allen (1999), among others, claimed that feminist theorists from the 1970s and 1980s, who had framed Arendt through a binary gender order, had missed the complex processes of meaning formation, change of meaning and even failure of meaning that characterize all forms of discourse.

For theorists, such as Bonnie Honig and Amy Allen, non-foundationalism constitutes the leitmotif of Arendt’s political oeuvre. Both argue that even if Arendt was not a feminist and did not explicitly deal with questions such as the political significance of the body and gender in her writings, her persistent and non-compromising reflections on the importance of contingency, openness and solidarity for democratic politics are crucial elements for feminist attempts to theorize the political (Honig 1995, 150; Allen 1999). Thus, in striking opposition to early second wave feminist readers of Arendt, such as Wendy Brown (1988) and Hanna Pitkin (1981, 1998), who claims that Arendt is an anti-democrat and that her works, such as *On Revolution* is “an extraordinarily confusing and confused book,” (Pitkin 1998, 225) Honig, for instance, contends that “Arendt’s theory is [...] an activist, democratic politics of contest, resistance, and amendment” (Honig 1993, 77). More importantly, according to Honig: “Arendt’s politics is a promising model for those brands of feminism that seek to contest (performatively or agonistically) the prevailing construction of sex and gender into binary and binding categories of identity, as well as the prevailing binary division of political space into a public and private realm” (Honig 1995, 136-137). Honig’s stance on this aspect is shared by Amy Allen, who reads Arendt parallel to Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.

In Part I of this study, I examined in detail the multifaceted critique that Arendt’s silence on gender faced during the first two decades of feminist secondary scholarship. In light of this critique, Honig’s optimism sounds both radical and controversial. In what ways can Arendt’s political philosophy be understood as contributing to feminist theorizing of the politics of performativity? Furthermore, how can the thought of Hannah Arendt, the “gender blind” “non-feminist,” be utilized for contesting and resisting hegemonic conceptions of

gender and sexuality?

In order to disentangle this seeming paradox, I will in chapter 5.1 examine Honig's definition of "agonism" by outlining her critique of Seyla Benhabib's reading of Arendt as a "reluctant modernist," Honig's critique leads to a rejection of universalism and foundationalism as suitable models for thinking democratic politics, as well as to an affirmative quest for non-foundational foundations. I will next analyze Honig's highly original way of turning to J.L Austin's speech act theory and the US Declaration of Independence for her own radicalization of Arendt as a precursor to the politics of performativity. Finally, I will show how gender and sexuality emerge as performatives in Honig's radical reading of Arendt.

My discussion of Honig is followed by an analysis of Amy Allen's elaboration of Arendt (chapter 5.2). In her reading, Allen formulates a conception of solidarity that is not based on identity politics. Contrasting her notion of "solidarity" with the sisterhood frameworks of 1970s feminist theorizing, Allen argues that Arendt provides conceptual tools for theorizing solidarity and collective action that transgress gender binaries as well as categories of race and class. Finally, I will focus on a number of feminist scholars who theorize gender in relation to Jewish identity (chapter 5.2). Through an analogy of these two identity categories, interpreters such as Jennifer Ring and Bet-Ami Bar On attempt to theorize both Jewishness and gender in Arendt as performative categories.

Taken together, the feminist ideas discussed in chapter 5 have contributed to the readings of Arendt as a queer ally. Hence this chapter as a whole establishes the groundwork for discussing interpretations of Arendt as a critic of heteronormativity (chapter 6).

### **5.1 Arendt as a model for feminist agonistic politics**

In her 1995 essay "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," Honig takes issue with what she regards as feminist tendencies to associate agonism with masculinity, male hegemony and masculinist thinking.<sup>30</sup> She rejects charges of anti-feminism against Arendt that are based on a critique of the agonistic aspects of her political philosophy, and laments that these accusations are based on a narrow-minded conception of politics, which juxtaposes agonism and associationism up to a point to which "agonistic feminism" becomes a contradiction in terms (Honig 1995, 156).

<sup>30</sup> Agonism (from the Greek term *ἀγών* "agon" contest, struggle, assembly, fight) has been declared by some feminist theorists to be an expression of a Machiavellian and Schmittian, masculine ideal of politics as violent contest and war. Honig mentions Adrienne Rich, Hanna Pitkin and Wendy Brown as examples of feminists who reject agonism on this basis.

Although Adrienne Rich, Wendy Brown and Hanna Pitkin receive their dosage of Honig's critique, the main target here is Seyla Benhabib. "Rather than reassessing the meaning of agonism and its possibilities for feminism, Benhabib accepts and even expands upon earlier feminist genderings of agonism as the provenance of male action" (Honig 1995, 156). Honig's critique targets particularly Benhabib's 1993 essay "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Conception of Public Space" in which Benhabib characterizes two ways of understanding Arendt's concept of "public space," namely the agonistic and the associate model. Rejecting the former and defending the latter, Benhabib writes:

According to the "agonistic" view, the public realm represents that space of appearances in which moral and political greatness, heroism and preeminence are revealed, displayed, shared with others. This is a competitive space, in which one competes for recognition, precedence and acclaim. The agonal space is based on competition rather than collaboration [...] By contrast, according to the associational view [...] a public space emerges whenever and wherever, in Arendt's words, "men act together in concert." On this model, public space is the space "where freedom can appear." (Benhabib 1993, 102)

Honig, like Benhabib (1993, 1996), reads Arendt's *The Human Condition* as a critique of modernity. As I have shown in the context of my analysis of feminist interpretations of Arendt's critique of the social (chapter 2), for Arendt, modernity marks a historical turmoil of rapid changes, technological innovations and political revolutions. She characterizes modernity as an era of continuous searching for new political foundations to replace old doctrines and traditions, such as Christian religious authority (Honig 1993, 96-97; HC, 248-325). Most importantly, in modernity, a void appears in the symbolic place of power. When the authority of the Church is put into question, and when the King's body is severed from the head, then numerous attempts to occupy this empty space of power emerge (see also Kantorowicz, 1997). For Arendt, imperialist expansion and the totalitarian movements of Nazism and Stalinism, for instance, are the consequences of the modern quest to fill this symbolic void. Totalitarian ideologies treat the body politic as an entity that must be controlled and dominated by a higher power which receives its ultimate legitimation from an absolute law (OT, 460-465). Hence, "[f]oundational foundations, Arendt argues, invariably close political spaces and engender coercive and exclusionary practices" (Honig 1993, 77).

Unlike Benhabib, Honig does not conceive Arendt as "a reluctant modernist," who believes

that in some contexts, such as in the case of human rights discourse, it is imperative that we have universal values and secure foundations that bind people together (cf. Benhabib 1996, 138-39; cf. Birmingham 2006). Instead, Honig pushes Arendt towards a post-foundational, even postmodern direction. What this means is that for Honig, Arendtian democracy is inherently a dynamic and agonistic system of governance in which debate, contest, amendment and rotation of power directs decision-making. Criticizing Benhabib, Honig argues:

Privileging the associative model of individuals acting with each other in concert, she [Benhabib] deprives feminism of a much-needed appreciation of the necessary agonistic dimension of all action in concert, in which politically engaged individuals act and struggle both with and against each other. (ibid. 156)

In order to understand the friction between Honig and Benhabib, it is helpful here to think of Arendt's agonism and non-foundationalism as being in opposition to deliberative models of democracy. Unlike notions of the subject as an autonomous, rational, moral agent, Honig claims that in Arendt's thinking there is no doer behind the deed that can be extracted for analysis (Honig 1993, 78). This entails that politics is not an organized and coherent game which follows the rules of a social contract, or aims towards rational consensus, as Habermas and Benhabib, for instance, argue.<sup>31</sup> Also, Honig is more interested in the individual political agent than economic and social structures that shape the political.

In *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993) Honig explicates her interpretative angle to Arendt by elaborating on the affinity between Arendt and Nietzsche:

I begin with her [Arendt's] treatments of action, identity, and the self,

<sup>31</sup> Chantal Mouffe's critique of liberalism illuminates the tension inherent in a radical conception of democracy: "Contrary to what neo-liberal ideologists would like us to believe, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives [...] one of the main tenets of this liberalism is the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason. No wonder that the political constitutes its blind spot. Liberalism has to negate antagonism since, by bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain – antagonism reveals the very limit of any rational consensus" (Mouffe 2007, 2). However, unlike Mouffe, who utilizes Marx and Carl Schmitt in her critique of liberalism, Honig's agonism is derived from her reading of Nietzsche. Honig's Nietzsche reading is heavily influenced by Judith Butler's early theorization of the politics of performativity. See particularly *Gender Trouble*, 1990, 25, 33. For an alternative reading of Arendt and Nietzsche, as well as a critique of Honig's reading, see Villa (1993) and (1995). Amy Allen (1999) points out that Butler elaborates on the connection between her work and Arendt in *Excitable Speech* 1997, 179 n9.



tracing her theorization of action as *sui generis*, her treatment of identity as a product not the precondition of action, and her (Nietzschean) reading of the self as a multiple creature that resists and exceeds the constructions of autonomy, agency and responsible subjectivity. These commitments are central to Arendt's account of how lasting *identities or republics* can be founded without "foundationalism" and why indeed, they *must* be. (Honig 1993, 77, italics added.)

From the passage above it becomes evident that not only is Arendt an anti-foundationalist according to Honig, but she is also an anti-essentialist in terms of her conception of the self and identity. Honig draws here a parallel between the composition of political agents and political institutions. She claims, for instance, that since the self is according to Arendt a Nietzschean, free multiplicity, then it follows that also political entities, such as republics, must be non-foundational. I will next examine this argument more closely and also point out the textual places where Honig's interpretation of Arendt is clearly framed through some key themes from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

### ***The performativity of speech and action***

Honig argues that Arendt, just like Nietzsche, holds that there is no essence behind various mental faculties, but that the self is a multiplicity, always in a state of becoming. In addition to Nietzsche's works, and *The Human Condition*, Honig also draws from Arendt's posthumously published *The Life of the Mind* in order to establish the architecture of the self as a multiplicity (Honig 1993, 82-83). "For the first time, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explicitly says that 'there is difference in identity'" (Honig 1993, 82).

*The Life of the Mind (Vita Contemplativa)* constitutes a genealogy of the dichotomy between thought (*theoria, contemplatio*) and action (*praxis*) in Western philosophy. Arendt is indeed explicitly critical of theories claiming the mind to be a unified, transparent entity and as such easily accessible for introspection. The larger context of Arendt's critique is her own interest in examining conscience as an "internal dialogue" of the mind. She is led to this problematic through her 1963 *New Yorker* essays on the trial of Adolf Eichmann (Honkasalo 2008; Ojakangas 2013, 24-29). The direct quotation "there is difference in identity" does not actually exist in that form on the pages that Honig refers to. Nevertheless, Honig draws the conclusion that "[T]he subject as multiplicity is the self of *The Life of the Mind*, a plurality whose parties, in the absence of any hierarchical ordering, often engage in a struggle of dominion" (Honig 1993, 83). For Honig, these passages indicate that the

self is dynamic, agonistic and non-definable. “Prior to or apart from action, the self is fragmented, discontinuous, indistinct [...] This self attains identity – becomes a ‘who’ by acting in the public realm in concert with others” (Honig 1993, 79-80; Honig 1995, 140).

In the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that the disclosure of the “who” – in other words, the person – in speech and action, always happens in the context of a network of other speakers and actors, which further complicates the dynamic and relational disclosure or individuation of the agent. This is why Honig sees Nietzschean agonism and tension both within the agent and also within the world in which it discloses itself (Honig 1993b, 529; Honig 1993, 83-84; Honig 1995, 140). I argue that the underlying framework of Honig’s enthusiastic parallel between Arendt and Nietzsche is drawn from Butler’s idea of performativity. One of the central arguments in *Gender Trouble* is that notions such as “gender” and “identity” do not designate an essence, but are instead processes of repetitive acts. Gender identity is hence manifested in the act itself. Quoting Nietzsche, Butler argues that:

The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” [...] we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. (Butler 1990, 33.)

Now, coming back to the question of agonistic democracy and the void in the place of power, Honig is puzzled by the question of what then politically stabilizes boundless action, the non-unitary self and the “space of appearances”? What solidifies the institutional protection of contingency that Honig holds to be necessary for democratic politics?

Instead of examining Arendt’s conception of constituent and constituted power as securing the political realm,<sup>32</sup> Honig follows again the theoretical framework of Butler and enters into a discussion of Arendt’s conception of speech and action through J.L Austin’s speech

<sup>32</sup> In my view, the best place to look for an answer to this question is to turn to Arendt’s writings on Montesquieu and Arendt’s conception of Roman law as establishing contractual relationships to secure the political realm with boundaries. Already in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt claims that: “Positive laws in constitutional government are designed to erect boundaries and establish channels of communication between men [...]. The stability of the laws correspond to the constant motion of all human affairs, a motion which can never end as long as men are born and die” (OT, 465; see also Honkasalo 2013).

act theory and Jacques Derrida's critique of Austin<sup>33</sup> (see also Honig 1993). Although the technical details of Honig's interpretation of Arendt through Austin and Derrida are lengthy and complex, her overall point is simple to grasp: Arendt's conception of speech and action often include examples of performative utterances and speech acts, such as "forgiving" and "promising," through which agents contribute to the creation of new domains of meaning. In fact, Honig argues that Arendt's *favorite* examples of action are precisely "forgiving" and "promising." Thus, by taking a closer look at speechacts and their performativity, Honig claims to see how durability and stability emerges in Arendt's political philosophy, without closure and foundationalism (Honig 1993, 89-96).

Promising and forgiving are not only mechanisms that constrain action [...] each is a performative utterance, a speech act that in the act of being spoken brings "something new into being that did not exist before" and creates "new relations and realities." [...] Promising enables us "to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible..." [...] Arendt looks to promising as a source of stability, because, unlike the totalizing strategies of self-mastery or autonomy, promising creates limited and isolated areas of stability in the in-between of the public realm. (Honig 1993, 84-85)

Where Honig parts ways with Butler is Honig's turn to the Declaration of Independence and the U.S Constitution as examples of performativity. For Honig, the Declaration is an example of a performative utterance, because it is the result of the constituent power of a plurality, a political community, "We the people," who declare, promise, found and hence bring into being a set of new, democratic institutions through an act of writing (Honig

<sup>33</sup> In *How to do Things with Words* (1962), Austin makes a distinction between "constative" and "performative speech acts," which roughly corresponds to stating a fact, versus doing something with words. A constative utterance is a statement with a definable truth value that depends on the statement's correspondence with reality, whereas performative utterances in fact alter the status of the referent and lack truth value. One of Austin's examples of a performative utterance is the statement "I do," in the context of a marriage ceremony. This statement is not uttered in order to state the marital status of a person but establishes instead the bond of marriage itself (Austin 1962, 13). According to Derrida's deconstruction of Austin, speech act theory presupposes a much more sophisticated cultural context and process of iteration than what Austin was aware of. Contrary to traditional, positivist philosophy of language, Derrida rejects the correspondence theory of truth. In line with the later Wittgenstein, he claims that there is no outside to language in the sense that we could step outside language and determine how words correspond to objects in the 'real' world. Instead, the meaning of words is determined by their particular use, repetition, circulation and reiteration in particular linguistic contexts or 'language-games' (cf. Honig 1993 89-96; cf Pulkkinen 2003). In my opinion the best articulation of Austin's idea of speech as performative action can be found in his essay "Performative Utterances" (1956) in *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford University Press, 1979. This essay is far less technical than his later book *How to Do Things with Words*.

1995, 137). The singular plural of the “We the people” replaces the void of power in a way that resists closure, because unlike the King and his divine authority, this body politic consists of a contingent plurality existing in time.<sup>34</sup>

Although Arendt herself does not use the term ‘agonism’ to describe her view of political action or the public space, Honig holds that agonism is evident in Arendt’s political thinking. The textual support for Honig’s argument comes from Arendt’s theorizing of revolutions. Arendt holds, for instance, that one of the most crucial transformations that needs to take place in order for political freedom to become a living reality, is a radical de-centralization of power and the replacement of hierarchical power structures by such regional horizontal structures that guarantee everyone the equal right to participate (CR, 233). As I pointed out in my discussion on Zerilli (chapter 2), Arendt paraphrases Thomas Jefferson and echoes Mary Wollstonecraft, when she claims that “[p]olitical freedom, generally speaking means the right ‘to be a participator in government,’ or it means nothing” (OR, 218). For those reasons, Arendt is empathic and supportive of civil disobedience and even law breaking as a form of genuine political action (CR, 75-77; Kalyvas 2008, 286-291).

Throughout her writings on revolutionary political action, Arendt stresses that the reason why people are able to carry out uprisings and revolutions in the first place is because they have come to realize that they have both the capacity and the legitimate right to act politically in more direct and radical ways than by simply voting for, electing, or running as representatives (Honig 1993; cf. Honkasalo 2013). Precisely because of the lack of absolute foundations, the lack of universal values, and the void in the place of power, democratic politics after modernity needs institutional protection. According to Honig, Arendt’s thinking thus wrestles with the paradox of how to ground democracy without a univocal and authoritarian foundation (Honig 1995, 147).

<sup>34</sup> Again, according to Arendt’s bottom-up conception of power as *potentia* – as the possibility (*möglichkeit*) inherent in people acting in concert – revolutions do not happen as a result of the dialectical movements of laws of history, nor due to some other form of inner, deterministic logic. Rather, they happen when heterogeneous people come together and act together in concert in order to start something new and bring forth change (HC, 177, 200-201; Kalyvas 2008; Honkasalo 2013).

### *From the U.S. Declaration to gender performativity*

Arendt's briefest and most pointed discussion of her view of politics and action comes to us by way of her reading of the American Declaration of Independence. Here we have all the basic elements of Arendt's account. The Declaration is a political act, an act of power, because it founds a new set of institutions and constitutes a new political community, it "brings something into being which did not exist before," it "establishes new relations and creates new realities." It is a "perfect" instance of political action because it consists "not so much in an 'argument and support of an action'" as in its being an action that appears in words. It is a performative utterance, a speech-act, performed among and before equals in the public realm. (Honig 1995, 137; cf. Honig 1993, 94-95)

Honig's textual resource is here Arendt's *On Revolution*, in which Arendt elaborates on the significance of the American Revolution for theorizing constituent power. Here Arendt pays specific attention to the following lines of the Declaration:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.<sup>35</sup>

According to Arendt, the momentum for institutionalizing public freedom comes from the declaratory lines "We hold." However, according to her, the Declaration needs to be disconnected from its "self-evident" truths, because all political truths must be open for debate and amendment if the Declaration is to establish a true democracy. The problem that Arendt sees in the *Declaration* is that it in fact does not receive its authority and legitimation from the consent of "We the people," but from an external authority, namely God (OR 192-93). Honig argues that "Arendt cleanses the Declaration and the founding of their violent, *constative* moments, or the irresistible anchors of God, self-evident truth and natural law. There is no 'being' behind this doing. The doing, the performative, is everything" (Honig 1995, 138, my emphasis; cf. Honig 1993; cf. Butler 1990, 25). Here Honig's reading differs notably from Julia Kristeva's reading of political founding. Honig emphasizes the importance of the non-violent nature of democratic, constituent power and new beginnings, whereas Kristeva emphasizes the generative violence in all new

<sup>35</sup> My references are to the transcript of the original Declaration: <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration.html>

beginnings.

What then is the connection here with the performativity of gender? I argue that Honig wrests out a conception of the performativity of gender as well as a critique of identity politics by appeal to her reading of Arendt and the American Declaration of Independence. Honig's revolutionaries are "[...] a performative production, not the essence of a class, or a gender, but always the (sedimented) product of the actions, behaviors, norms, and institutional structures of individuals, societies and political cultures" (Honig 1995, 43). She attempts in this way to theorize revolutionary action without a homogenous, collective subject, but instead as a movement that generates an "us," without a clear, fixed definition.

In order to clarify Honig's view on gender performativity, I want to return now to her earlier discussion of the Declaration in *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), where Honig explains that for Arendt:

The acting self is like the performative moments of the Declaration: free, (self-) creative, transformative, and imitable. Arendt's performatives *postulate plurality* and her actors *postulate multiplicity*. The power of the performative "we hold" is actualized by distinct and diverse individuals with little in common prior to action except a care for the world and agonal passion for distinction. (Honig 1995, 141, italics added.)

In Honig's reading the so-called identity categories like "gender," "race," "ethnicity" or "nationality" are thus not constative but performative. In Arendt's own terminology, "what" someone is, is a constative, whereas "who" someone is, is an act of performativity. What Honig defines as her own radicalization of Arendt, entails that we understand and take seriously Arendt's critique of identity politics. "In Arendtian terms then, this strategy depends upon the belief that the sex/gender identities that 'we hold' [to be self-evident] can be amended and augmented in various ways through [political] action. Political theory's task is to aid and enable that practice of (re-founding)" (ibid. 148). It is my contention that this is why Honig defends agonism so passionately and claims that an element of agonism is the sine qua non for a feminist conception of democratic politics, even when agonism is internal to the feminist movement itself.<sup>36</sup> In other words, through her radicalization

<sup>36</sup> Honig's reading of the U.S Constitution resembles James Madison's (1787-88) original conception of the relationship between political agonism and the Constitution. Madison understood that if the legitimacy of the government was to be truly derived from the consent of the people, and if people were to truly govern themselves, then agony and factions could not be eradicated. In a famous passage from *The Federalist Papers*, Madison contends: "There are two methods of curing

of Arendt, Honig tries to make room for new ways of imagining intelligible subjects and political discourse. As Honig argues, this requires a rethinking of what is meant by "political theory" itself.

Honig's reading is a radical distancing from earlier readings of Arendt and comes close to projects such as Linda Zerilli's (2005) requirement to rethink political collectives and political freedom. Her interpretation has had a strong and lasting impact on readings that frame Arendt as a precursor to postmodern critiques of the subject.

As I have argued, Honig's interpretation has had a notable impact on the gradual postmodern shift in Anglophone feminist interpretations of Arendt. However, her reading has also been contested for an overt postmodernizing of Arendt. Dana Villa (1992), for instance, has argued that Honig's reading does not do justice to the nuances in Arendt's critique of modernity, and that Honig's reading takes into account only the positive aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy.

While poststructuralist readings of Arendt help place her theory of political action in a new and different light, it would be a great mistake to begin reading her as a poststructuralist *avant la lettre*. This is *not* because she is "really" a neo-Aristotelian, as many, including Habermas, have argued. Nor is it because she is, in Seyla Benhabib's phrase, a "reluctant modernist." [...] But it must also be pointed out, contra her more enthusiastic poststructuralist readers, that there are significant limitations to Arendt's Nietzscheanism. Here it seems to me, we can reach the heart of the issue: Arendt's uniqueness, her distance from both Habermasian seriousness and Derridean/postmodern playfulness [...] must be accounted for. (Villa 1992, 275, emphasis in the original)

the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other by controlling (sic) its effects. There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction; the one by destroying the liberty, which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions and the same interests [...] *Liberty is to faction, what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires*" (Madison, FP §10, 51, italics added). In his treatment of factions, Madison affirms a high tolerance of faction, and rejects attempts to suffocate it by means of force or despotism. Violent uprisings, such as Shays' Rebellion, are according to Madison not caused simply by facts such as economic depression, but more importantly, by impotent authority and the questioned legitimacy of the government. As a reader of classics in political philosophy, Madison was well aware that the only way for a democratic government to stay in control peacefully was through the voluntary consent of the people. Honig does not mention Madison, or the connection between Arendt and Madison in her reading. I see this as interesting particularly because her reading is so heavily invested in the history of American democracy.

Villa's angle of critique is a different interpretation of Nietzsche. Pulkkinen (2003), on the other hand, regards both Honig and Villa as postmodernizers of Arendt and asks also that those aspects of Arendt's theorizing that do not fit into the framework of non-foundationalism be accounted for. This view of Honig and Arendt is also shared by Butler & Spivak (2007). I will next examine Amy Allen's (1999) attempt to offer a middle way between Honig's postmodernist interpretation and Benhabib's Habermasian consensus reading of Arendt. Allen's reading hinges on queer interpretations of Arendt and brings into the center of focus Arendt's revolutionary use of the concept of "the conscious pariah."

## **5.2 Another take on "sisterhood": towards a new politics of solidarity**

Amy Allen states explicitly that her intention is to use Arendt's works for "feminist purposes," despite the fact that Arendt did not identify with the women's movement and never wrote much on the political significance of gender and sexuality (Allen 1999, 87-88, 97). What Allen wants to do with Arendt's texts is nothing less than develop a new, feminist conception of power and solidarity (ibid. 94, 98, 104).

In contrast to Bonnie Honig – who conceives Seyla Benhabib to be a representative of the kind of liberal democratic theorizing that is incompatible with an agonistic, performative account of politics – Allen takes her cue for reading Arendt as a postmodernist precisely from Benhabib. Here we can see how feminist theorists from the same historical time period operate with different notions of postmodernism. Translating Benhabib's notion of "reluctant modernism" as nascent postmodernism, Allen argues that Arendt belongs to the same family of thinkers as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler:

Seyla Benhabib has argued persuasively that there is a fundamental tension in Arendt's political thought between her modernist commitment to universal morality and her "postmodernist" critique of foundationalism; as a result of this tension, Benhabib labels Arendt a "reluctant modernist." If Benhabib is correct, then despite Arendt's commitment to some of the ideals of modernity, there are elements of her thought that are compatible with a postmodernist perspective such as Foucault's and Butler's. (ibid. 89)

Allen is by no means the first scholar to expand Arendt's thinking towards postmodern theorizing. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, in addition to Benhabib, Honig (1992) and Dana Villa (1992) have also called attention to postmodern elements in Arendt's thinking. Nevertheless, Allen is among the few feminist scholars who read Arendt in



tandem with Foucault, and who see an affinity between Arendt's critique of the social in *The Human Condition* and Foucault's critique of normalizing power in *Discipline and Punish*. Whereas some feminist philosophers, such as Oksala (2010, 2012), reject the affinity between Arendt's and Foucault's notions of normalizing power, Allen reads Arendt as a valuable resource to complement and even correct Foucault's and Judith Butler's conceptions of power.

I discussed feminist receptions of Arendt's critique of the social in detail in Part I. However, for the sake of clarity, I want to extract and repeat one specific element of Arendt's critique for brief analysis before moving forward. I want to do this because Allen's comparison between Foucault and Arendt relies on an alleged family resemblance between their notions of normalizing power and social conformism.

The "social" writes Arendt, functions like one massive household, in which its members are expected to conform to the same interest. Because of this, the government that best exemplifies the order of the social is bureaucracy (HC, 39-40):

[S]ociety expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement. (ibid. 40)

According to Arendt, then, the pretentious equality of the social is not based on political and juridical equality, but on a normalizing power that assumes and expects everyone to be similar. Only those who are regarded as normal and similar to each other are held to be equal. The birth of new "social sciences," such as "economics," "statistics" and "population analysis" coincides with the rise of the social and thus "[...] men become social beings [that] unanimously follow certain patterns of behavior, so that those who do not keep to the rules can be considered to be *asocial* or *abnormal*" (HC, 42, italics added). Failure to respond to society's demand for conformism is hence a sign of abnormality.

Arendt argues that the domination of bureaucracy wipes out the delicate boundaries that shield the public and the private, so that the result is a mass society in which every political question has become a matter of economic administration. In this type of mass bureaucracy, the administration of life becomes the main task of governance. "[S]ociety is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities concerned with sheer survival are permitted to appear

in public” (HC, 46).

Allen refers to the sections of *The Human Condition* that I have cited above, and interprets Arendt as proclaiming a Foucauldian approach to the relationship between social norms and power. This means that what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” at a given historical time and geographical context is a result of normalizing power. Hence, “Foucault and Arendt [...] share a critique of the normalizing power of modern society”<sup>37</sup> (Allen 1999, 90-91).

Other textual evidence for Arendt’s alleged postmodernism is according to Allen her notion of the subject as a multiplicity, which she shares not only with Foucault, but also with Judith Butler. “Foucault, Butler, and Arendt also share a critique of the humanist and existentialist notion of subjectivity,” contends Allen, and refers to Honig (1992): “...she [Honig] is right to note this dimension of Arendt’s conception of subjectivity; and this dimension has clear affinities with the socially constructed account of subjectivity embraced by both Foucault and Butler” (Allen 1999, 91-92). In Allen’s view then, Arendt can be perceived as a thinker who theorizes the relationship between normalizing power and subjectivity in a direction that will later be called “subjection” in postmodern theorizing.

Allen’s enthusiasm is evident. She does not problematize the proposed affinity between Butler and Foucault, but holds instead that they can be perceived as operating with similar accounts of subjectivity. Nevertheless, most important for Allen’s project is not the notion of normalization or even postmodern subjectivity, but instead her perception of an affinity between Arendt’s, Foucault’s and Butler’s conceptions of power as productive. It is here that Allen sees a possibility to bring “...Arendt together with Foucault and Butler” and for getting “Arendt’s work to bear on feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory” (Allen 1999, 97).

<sup>37</sup> Allen detects a parallel between Arendt and Foucault, but in my view Arendt’s critique can be traced back all the way to Alexis de Tocqueville’s critical analysis of American democracy, which Arendt was inspired by (see also Villa 2008, 85-107) In *Democracy in America* (1835) Tocqueville writes about coerced social conformism in the following way: “After having thus successfully taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the supreme [bureaucratic] power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd” (Tocqueville 1835/2004, 301-304). See also Villa’s entry in *Feminist Interpretations of Tocqueville* (2009).

In Allen's reading then, Foucault and Butler represent well-known authorities in postmodern theorizing. Butler's *Gender Trouble*, furthermore, represents a path breaker in the kind of feminist theorizing that Allen supports. I argue that Allen organizes, contextualizes and presents Arendt's texts in light of Foucault and Butler, with the deliberate attempt to generate a shared understanding of also Arendt as a postmodern theorist, which again legitimates reading Arendt as relevant for "feminist purposes." This reading strategy proceeds by correcting Arendt's problematic silence on gender through an attempt to read a performative account of gender and sexuality into Arendt's texts. Despite their differences, Honig and Allen thus share common ground in their argumentative logic: if it can be shown that Arendt is a postmodern theorist, then it can also be shown that she is relevant for feminist theorizing.

This argumentative logic is apparent in the way that Allen deals with certain conceptual distinctions that other feminist theorists have found highly problematic. For instance, Allen argues that: "Arendt laments the collapsing of the distinction between the private and public spheres and the resulting rise of the social, reasserts a strict *metaphysical* distinction between the two, and insists that the public is the only sphere in which power operates" (Allen 1999, 95, italics added). A bit later Allen continues that the "quasi-metaphysical" separation between the public and the private must be addressed if she [Allen] is to succeed in her task of bringing Arendt to the same level as Foucault and Butler. "I must strip Arendt's conception of action and power of its metaphysical baggage [...]. Once we have stripped Arendt's distinction between the public and the social of its metaphysical baggage, we are free to accept Arendt's analysis of the rise of the social while rejecting the negative valence she adheres to it" (ibid. 95-97).

Allen does not elaborate on the meanings of "metaphysical" and "quasi-metaphysical" in this context, but she nevertheless refers to Benhabib's critique of Arendt as a reluctant modernist. We can thus assume that "metaphysical" means here some sort of ontological foundationalism. When Arendt's alleged foundationalism is overcome, the road is clear.

### ***Coalition across differences***

I want to return now to Allen's overall project, which is to formulate a new feminist account of solidarity as power. This project takes momentum not only from Foucault and Butler, but also from a critique of early second wave conceptions of solidarity as "sisterhood." I have discussed the interpretative, sisterhood framework in the first chapter of this study and have argued that Arendt emerges as an anti-feminist within this framework. Allen, on

the other hand, takes distance from the sisterhood framing and hence her approach stands in stark opposition to feminist scholars such as Rich, O'Brien, Pitkin, Pateman, Brown, Elhstain and Harstock.

Early second-wave feminists saw no problem with branding 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 – hence, to solidarity (at least in one sense of the term). However, by the late 1980s, the critique of any notion of the common interest of women, the common oppression of women, even the category of women, was in full swing. This critique rightly pointed out that attempts to specify the essence of women [...] marginalized or excluded outright women of color, working-class women, and lesbians. (Allen 1999, 103-104)

Allen mentions Judith Butler (1990) as one of the most voiced critics of identity politics and the sisterhood framework. However, where Allen parts ways with Butler, is what Allen reads as Butler's critique of the concept of "solidarity." In *Gender Trouble*, Butler finds certain notions of solidarity problematic, because of their inherent normative exclusion of some persons or groups of people as not belonging to the unity within which solidarity is formed (Butler 1990, 15; cf. Allen 1999, 104). Allen interprets Butler as criticizing *all* notions of feminist solidarity. Hence, she contends: "Butler's critique of solidarity [...] is so radical that it has the effect of making it hard to understand what, if anything, might bind members of the feminist movement together" (ibid 104). Allen is thus puzzled with similar questions as Honig. What stabilizes boundless action and what enables coalition building across differences? As I pointed out in my discussion on Kristeva (chapter 3.2), Julia Kristeva also finds this question to be one of the most central questions for feminist political organizing.

Allen's worry about the future of feminist politics also bears a resemblance to Linda Zerilli's quest to reflect on a feminist conception of freedom and feminist public spaces (see my discussion in chapter 2 above). Neither Allen nor Zerilli is concerned with formulating political agency in relation to an identity-group, such as "women." Yet, they both ask what is left if identity and unity is abandoned? What makes the political coming together possible in the first place? (cf. Elomäki 2012, 66-111).

Allen reads Butler's critique of identity politics in *Gender Trouble* as leaving only two

alternatives for feminist political theorizing. Either the category of “women” is embraced at the cost of excluding those who do not belong to this category for one reason or another, or then “women” as a political identity category must be rejected altogether. Neither option is satisfactory. Instead, Allen proposes that feminists need to rethink the concept of “solidarity” (Allen 1999, 104). This task brings Arendt’s theorizing of political action and power to the center of Allen’s focus:

Hannah Arendt provides feminists with the resources necessary for reformulating solidarity as a kind of power that emerges out of concerted action – as something that is achieved through action in concert, rather than as the *sister-feeling* that automatically results from the sharing of a pregiven, fixed, and, hence, repressive, identity. Thus Arendt helps us think about how members of oppositional social movements can be united in a way that, far from excluding or repressing difference, embraces and protects it. (ibid. 104, italics added)

As can be seen from the passage I have quoted above, Allen contrasts Arendt’s philosophy of action with the “sisterhood” identity politics of early second wave feminists. Through a reading of the fifth chapter – not the second chapter – of *The Human Condition*, Arendt now emerges as an ally for a feminist critique of feminism. Allen’s shift in interpretative angles is significant. Not only does Allen participate in feminist Arendt scholarship, but more importantly, like Honig, Benhabib and Zerilli, she also utilizes Arendt to engage in a critical dialogue with the feminist tradition itself. Once again, the polyphony within academic feminist scholarship is present.

Why is Arendt’s notion of power so relevant for Allen’s feminist project? Why not simply draw from Foucault and Butler? The textual support for Allen’s argument comes from Arendt’s concept of power and hence chapter 5 of *The Human Condition*. As I have argued in the context of my discussion on Zerilli, in the fifth chapter of *The Human Condition* (titled “Action”), Arendt theorizes power as the product of acting in concert. For Arendt, the meaning of the term “power” comes from the Latin term *potentia* (ability, capacity), which she translates as the German *Möglichkeit* (a possibility and opportunity). In contrast to the Marxist and Weberian notions of power as *Macht* and *Gewalt* (domination or violence), Arendt theorizes power as first and foremost productive, enabling and generating new beginnings (HC, 200; CR, 142-143; cf. Kalyvas 2008). This conception of power is according to her not traceable to an identity group, and power is not something that a group has, possesses or can use.

Now, according to Allen, “Arendt implicitly rejects the notion that group solidarity rests on a shared identity if that identity is understood as resting on an inherent sameness, be it an essence, a shared experience of oppression, or what have you” (Allen 1999, 105). It is important to remember here that Arendt’s paradigm example of “power,” comes from her reflection on non-violent uprisings and revolutions, in which people come together in solidarity regardless of their differences, such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion and political views.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Between consensus and agonism***

Allen notes that in the context of her discussion of action, Arendt also elaborates on the connection between narration, action and meaningfulness. Political action in the Arendtian sense is meaningful due to the fact that it always happens against the background of a relational community of speakers, the “web of human relationships” (HC, 188; Allen 1999, 105). In a similar way as thinking is conceptualized in order for its content to be comprehensible for others, also action needs to be conceptualized in the form of a story so that it can have durability in the fragile and changing human world. For Allen, this means that communication is an essential aspect for understanding solidarity in a novel way.

Arendt maintains that communication and action in concert would be unnecessary, even superfluous, if we were all the same: Everyone would immediately intuit the needs, wants, hopes and dreams of others because they would be the same as one’s own needs, wants, hopes, and dreams. Thus, the very fact that communication and concerted action are necessary in political life indicates the truth of the claim that sameness – and thus, any notion of identity that is predicated on an appeal to sameness – is antipolitical. However, the flip side of this is the claim that communication and action in concert would not be impossible if we were all radically different. Communication and action in concert depend on some sort of commonality between individuals; without that commonality, it would be

<sup>38</sup> Arendt was deeply moved by revolutions because revolutionary movements disclosed for her the enormous potential of collective political action - or the capacity to begin something new as Arendt herself put it, building on the Greek and Latin terms *archein* (to act, to lead) and *agere* (to act, to set things in motion). The 1956 Hungarian Revolution fascinated her, as she saw this as a historical instance in which people understood that in order to fight total domination, they had to establish new political institutions (revolutionary councils) in addition to withdrawing their consent. For a comparison of Arendt with the Arab Spring movement and the Serbian uprising, see Honkasalo 2013.

impossible to formulate political goals and strive to achieve them. (Allen 1999, 105)

For Allen then, Arendt helps us understand how action both establishes social bonds as well as individuates the agent who discloses herself in speech and action. Action and power belong together in a way that leaves room for theorizing political agency and particularly political resistance to social norms. This aspect is something that Allen does not find in Foucault and Butler (1990), because of their focus on the all-intrusive aspect of normalizing power. In her reading, Allen elaborates particularly on Arendt's concepts of "uniqueness," "distinction," "plurality" and "acting in concert." The passage I have quoted at length also shows that Allen situates herself somewhere between Honig's agonism and Benhabib's communicative action framework (cf. *ibid*, n83).

In discussing how concepts such as identity and nonidentity, equality and distinction, or plurality and action operate in Arendt's political writings, Allen draws attention to a theme that is in one way or another significant for all feminist interpretations of Arendt's work, namely her relation to Jewish identity. I have briefly dealt with Arendt's relation to her Jewish identity in the context of my analysis of feminist responses to "the Arendtian body" (chapter 1.2). In that discussion I examined various interpretations of Arendt's correspondence with Gershom Scholem. I will deal with feminist interpretations of Arendt's Jewishness in detail in the following chapter, but first I want to conclude my analysis of Allen by briefly elaborating on how Allen uses Arendt's relation to Jewish identity to strengthen her own interpretation of Arendt as a necessary ally for theorizing feminist solidarity.

Allen criticizes what she calls "deconstructive critics of identity" for their failure to live up to the political realities of marginalized and persecuted persons. At the heart is Allen's interpretation of Butler (1990) as a theorist who rejects all notions of identity. Allen claims that: "In the face of the realities of systematic domination, the claim 'I am not a woman – in fact, I am not even an (identical) I' is no less a grotesque and dangerous denial of political realities than 'I am a human being (not just a woman)'" (Allen 1999, 106).

Allen refers here to an essay by Arendt called "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," in which Arendt reflects on Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) as well as identity positioning as a political act. Arendt wrote the essay upon receiving the Lessing Prize in 1959. I will recite here the passage that Allen quotes:

Let me also quickly clear away another likely misunderstanding. When I use the word “Jew” I do not mean to suggest any special kind of human being [...]. In saying, “A Jew,” I did not even refer to a reality burdened or marked out for distinction by history. Rather, I was only acknowledging a political fact through which my being a member of this group outweighed all other questions of personal identity or rather had decided them in favor of anonymity, of namelessness [...]. Unfortunately, the basically simple principle in question here is one that is particularly hard to understand in times of defamation and persecution: the principle that one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack. (MDT, 18)

Allen interprets the passage above as a commitment to a certain kind of temporary, contingent and context-dependent identity politics. This type of a commitment is what she wishes to see in feminist political organizing and coalition building within various social movements. Arendt’s notion of acting in concert provides a model for political bonding that Allen does not find in Foucault and Butler. Let me quote Allen at length:

Thus, Arendt insists that one can affirm in some sense that one is a Jew without implying that being a Jew involves partaking of some fixed essence that all Jews share. Affirming membership in an identity group is a recognition of a political fact: As a fact it is undeniable, and to attempt to deny it is dangerous and deluded; but as political, it is resistible and, ultimately changeable [...]. Although she [Arendt] embraces group identities, she is careful to point out that such categories are not fixed, natural, or even historically determined, but are always knit out of the fabric of difference and distinction. Sometimes political realities compel us to acknowledge the political fact of certain identities, identities that are under attack, and if we wish to resist, to resist in terms of them. (Allen 1999, 107)

Based on her reading of Arendt’s essay, Allen quickly draws a parallel between Jewish identity and gender and confronts the early second wave conception of solidarity as the power of sisterhood among women. Allen argues that “women” as a category is not fixed. Instead she sees it as an undeniable, “political fact” with the implication that denying it is the same as blinding oneself from political realities. Allen further argues that “...one need not ‘be’ a woman to join in the collective effort to resist women’s subordination” and calls for “feminists (women and men)...to fight relations of subordination.” Finally, Arendt provides “...feminists a way of understanding the requirements for forging relations of



solidarity between unique, distinct women (and men) of different races, classes, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, who are, as a result of their differences, differently empowered” (Allen 1999, 109-110).

Allen does not problematize the analogy between Jewishness and gender. Anticipating the queer interpretations that I will examine next, I want to ask: isn’t Jewish identity at least to some extent precisely defined by certain relations of generationally transmitted kinship, as is the case with the “sisterhood” analogy?

Furthermore, although “race,” “class,” “ethnicity” and “sexual orientation” are understood here as undeniable political facts, by speaking of “women (and men)” Allen – in stark contrast to Honig and Butler – keeps the normative, binary conception of gender intact. What would it mean to say that “denying it is the same as blinding oneself from political realities”? It seems that in the end, Butler (1990) sneaks in through the backdoor. Doesn’t denying the political fact of the normative binary gender order imply precisely blinding oneself to the political reality that Butler discloses and critiques? I will examine these and similar questions next, as I move to a discussion of gay studies and queer readings of Arendt’s silence on gender.

### **5.3 The performativity of “the pariah” as a *feminist* conscious pariah**

Arendt’s autobiographical and political relation to Jewishness and Judaism is often brought up in the context of debates regarding her silence on gender. This is partly because unlike her attitude towards “womanhood” and feminism, Arendt reflected openly on her Jewish identity and her Zionist, activist past in interviews, essays and personal letters. The interview transcripts are also some of the rare, textual documents where Arendt speaks about her self-identity publicly. As I pointed out in Part I, Ann M. Laine (1983), for instance, argues that Arendt’s works cannot be adequately examined, unless her Jewish background is taken into consideration: “Arendt’s Zionist experience was foundational and thus must be taken into account when attempting to place her in an epoch, a tradition, a politics, or a school of thought.” This view is also shared by Arendt’s former colleagues, such as Richard J. Bernstein in *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*:

There is still a prevailing bias among many of Arendt’s critics and defenders that her understanding of politics was based primarily on her

(idealized) account of the Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica*. This is understandable if one focuses primarily on *The Human Condition*. But one should not forget that *The Human Condition* was published in 1958, when Arendt was 52. Her political education had begun 25 years earlier, and her primary concern had been to understand Jewish politics – or, rather, the failures of Jewish politics. (Bernstein 1996, 31)

Laine argues that contextualizing Arendt as a Jewish thinker is also significant for feminist evaluations of her work. “Arendt’s background of Jewish cultural and political experience allows us to see the relevancy of her work for feminist theory and action” (Laine 1983, 340). Since explicit analyses of gender are basically non-existent in Arendt’s writings, the cue has to be taken from other resources, where the parallel to questions of gender may be only implicit. In her historical context, Laine’s reading strategy was marginal, as is evident in her critique of Adrienne Rich’s ignorance of Arendt’s Jewish background. Nevertheless, for Laine, Arendt’s Jewish identity functions as an analogy for understanding gender in the context of her works.

### ***Analogies between gender and Jewishness***

I argue that studies that examine thoroughly the relationship between Jewishness and gender in Arendt’s works from a feminist perspective have tended to be a minority in the canon of Arendt scholarship (see also Ludz 1993, 349). If and when scholars reflect on Arendt’s relation to Jewishness, they mostly do it only with regard to her explicitly *Jewish*, political writings.<sup>39</sup> Hence, particularly introductions to Arendt’s work often arrange her writings in terms of her 1) early, Jewish writings, 2) German, philosophical texts and finally 3) American, political essays (e.g. Kateb 1984; Canovan 1992; Hansen 1993; Swift 2009). Jennifer Ring’s *The Political Consequences of Thinking: Gender and Judaism in the Work of Hannah Arendt* (1998) is one of the rare book-length studies in the Anglophone tradition which considers “[...] the impact of [Arendt’s] Jewish identity specifically on her *intellectual* work, and her gender on her work’s *reception*” (Ring 1998, 1, italics in the original). Ring goes further than Laine and argues that feminist scholars must not only take seriously

<sup>39</sup> Tuija Parvikko’s *The Responsibility of the Pariah: The Impact of Bernard Lazare on Arendt’s Conception of Political Action and Judgement in Extreme Situations* (1996) is an exception and a pioneering work on the significance of the Jewish tradition for Arendt’s *entire* political oeuvre. However, the work addresses Arendt’s attitude towards gender as a political question only in passing. See also Richard J. Bernstein: *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, which I think is by far one of the best introductions to Arendt’s political philosophy in general.

Arendt's Jewish background, they must also seriously consider the possibility that a part of the rage with which Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was received was due to the fact that she was a Jewish woman who stood out publicly against the European and Israeli, male-dominated Jewish leadership and intelligentsia. This view is also held by filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta in her portrayal of Arendt (Ring 1998, 1-20; 170, 284-288; von Trotta 2014 ).<sup>40</sup>

Whereas many feminist theorists, such as Rich (1979), Harstock (1983), Elshtain (1986), Cavarero (1995) and Moruzzi (2003), stress the biographical fact that Arendt was a woman working in a male-dominated, academic environment, Ring emphasizes Arendt not just as a woman, but as a Jewish woman. This angle of interpretation opens up a new field of inquiry within feminist receptions of Arendt's work, namely the question of what role gender may have played in the controversies that surrounded Arendt, such as the hostile reception of her report on the Eichmann trial? Ring explicates her position within feminist scholarship by stating: "I suggest not that gender is the only lens through which to view the Eichmann controversy and its reception, but that it is a plausible and powerful interpretation, giving us insight into how gender works, and making sense of an otherwise mysterious hostility toward Arendt" (Ring 1998, 17). In the first part of her book, Ring gives a rich account of the hostility with which the New York and Israeli Jewish community responded to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and argues that in her criticism of the Judenräte and the Israeli court, Arendt crossed the line of what is acceptable for a Jewish woman to do and say. According to Ring:

She [Arendt] might as well have been cross dressing [...]. Jewish assimilation is so profoundly a male project that when Arendt was accused of not writing from a Jewish perspective, or of betraying the Jewish people, the hidden message was really, "Stop acting like a Jewish man publicly: act more like a Jewish woman!" which was tantamount to bellowing her, "Be

<sup>40</sup> See von Trotta interviewed by Jerome Kohn at the "University in Exile 80th Anniversary" event, The New School for Social Research, NYC, January 30, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcTnelwGHY0> In the Q&A session, I asked von Trotta how she perceived Arendt's relation to gender. Von Trotta replied: "She was not a feminist at all [...] but she did not have to be, because from the beginning she was one of the most brilliant students in her class, with Heidegger...much more brilliant than some of her male colleagues...from the beginning she was always extraordinary...so she had not to fight for women's causes like we did or I did in the 70s. But she was an extraordinary woman. So we could have her as an example...or as an idol...to see, to look up to her...But when she was controversial (sic), when she was criticized so heavily, that I think was also – and when the professors are saying: 'that is all Hannah Arendt, all arrogance and with no feeling!' that was because she was a woman. That nobody would have said to a male professor."

silent!” [...] Her very presence embodied the deconstruction of accepted categories: a Jewish woman scholar acting publicly, and claiming to speak from a universalist standpoint. (Ring 1998, 170, emphasis in the original.)

The figure of Arendt as a ”masculine woman” is thus reiterated in Ring’s book, but now with a new connotation. Instead of holding Arendt accountable for succumbing to a Grecophilic, misogynist masculinity, Ring portrays Arendt as a woman who bravely refuses to accept the position assigned to her by a patriarchal, cultural and religious order. Ring’s interpretation sheds light on Arendt’s critique of what she called ”respectable Jews,” in other words, high society Jewish persons. In a letter to Jaspers, from December, 1946, Arendt describes what it means to be accepted as a respectable Jew: ”If I had wanted to become *respectable*, I would have either have had to give up my interest in Jewish affairs or not marry a non-Jewish man. Either option equally inhuman and in a sense crazy” (HAKJ, 70, my emphasis). Contrary to high society’s expectations, Arendt went into Jewish, leftist politics and married Heinrich Blücher, a Marxist German from a poor background.

Arendt’s critique of respectability can be found in a somewhat different form in the 1964 Günter Gaus interview, where she says: ”It just does not look good when a woman gives orders. She should try not to get into such a situation if she wants to remain feminine [...]. The problem itself played no role for me personally. To put it very simply, I have always done what I like to do. I did not worry if it was a man’s job. I never gave it any thought in that respect.”<sup>41</sup> In light of Ring’s interpretation, Arendt did not care for the goal of being perceived as a respectable woman, that is, a feminine woman, if respectability entailed preventing her from doing what she liked to do.

Arendt’s ”cross dressing” is hence seen as heroic in this context. Referring to bell hooks, Ring draws an analogy between her own argument and that of African American feminist theorists.

<sup>41</sup> *Hannah Arendt ‘Zur Person.’ Full Interview. In German with English subtitles*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsolmQfVsO4> / EU, 3, my emphasis. More than the published transcript, the filmed interview gives access to the specific ways in which Arendt states her views. In their discussion of the interview at a lecture at the European Graduate School, which I attended, Avital Ronell and Judith Butler debated over whether Arendt was sarcastic or not in some of the things she said to Gaus. In Ronell’s view, Arendt’s remark on women giving orders was a sarcastic remark. See Ronell & Butler (2009) ”Arendt, Heidegger and the Role of Thinking” <http://www.egs.edu/>

Black feminists have argued that a more acute reading of African American history is that black women have been "masculinized," turned into work animals and idealized as towers of strength, regarded as sexual, which is to say sexually available to any man with the inclination, but not feminine – a trait reserved for white women in American society [...]. The black feminist argument holds for all racially oppressed groups, including Jews. [...] Hannah Arendt spoke out publicly and critically about Jewish leadership during the holocaust and was accused of betraying the Jewish people. Anita Hill was publicly critical of a prominent black man and was accused of betraying the African American community. (Ring 1998, 11-12)

I have not seen an analogy like this elsewhere in feminist secondary literature on Arendt. Some scholars, such as Margaret Betz Hull (2002) do draw an analogy between persecution of Jews and persecution of African Americans in the context of her discussion of Arendt as a woman and a Jew, but Ring's argument according to which Jewish and African American women have been "masculinized" and sexualized as part of racist and misogynist stereotyping is unique within the context of feminist receptions of Arendt. As I have argued throughout Part I of this study, most early second wave feminist theorists attribute a negative notion of masculinity to Arendt as a person as well as to Arendt as a scholar.

Despite Ring's original argument, later on in her analysis of gender in Arendt's scholarly texts, Ring again draws a parallel between Jewishness and gender, but now somewhat paradoxically criticizes Arendt for her "flight from femininity" and warns that there "may be a price to pay for denying one's gender intellectually...The ultimate risk of any sort of denial is inauthenticity and fear of self" (ibid. 284-285). What Ring is implying is that Arendt's Promethean crossing of boundaries is in itself a heroic act, but that she should have done it publicly from a standpoint position, by affirming the identity of a *Jewish woman*. In Ring's use of terms, these are authentic identities and denying them is an act of inauthenticity. This may be another way of stating that Arendt betrayed both the Jewish people and her fellow women. I will return to this question a bit later on.

Despite the marginality of studies on gender and Jewishness in Arendt's work, Arendt's 1933 biography on Rahel Varnhagen is nevertheless a text that has by now generated its own interpretative trend. As Arendt did not write much about the women's movement, or about gender as a political question, some feminist theorists, such as Benhabib (1995), Cutting Gray (1993), Kristeva (1999/2001), Bar-On (1996; 2002) and Courtine-Denamy

(1997/2000) have turned towards those of Arendt's texts that deal with the political achievements and historical relevance of Jewish women, such as Rahel Varnhagen and Rosa Luxemburg. For some scholars, writing about these marginal voices within a male-dominated tradition is in itself a feminist act.

Bat-Ami Bar On (1997; 2002), for instance, argues that despite the fact that Arendt did not reflect much on gender in her political writings, she wrote voluminously on remarkable historical figures such as Varnhagen, Luxemburg and Isak Dinesen. Hence, her writings on Jewishness should be taken seriously in feminist evaluations of her overall work. I will quote Bar On at length in order to clarify how the analogy between gender and Jewishness in Arendt's works is constructed here by drawing both on biographical facts as well as philosophical texts:

[I]f Arendt's voice is to be taken by feminist theoreticians seriously and respectfully, as an authoritative woman's voice, then Arendt's Jewishness, and specifically her intellectual and ethicopolitical life commitment to it, has to be understood as central to her thinking as gender is to second wave feminist thinking. Indeed, feminists have to consider that her marginalization of gender may have resulted from the urgency that Jewishness, but not gender brought into her personal life. [...] Even if the effects that she experienced can be better understood in gender-differentiated terms, under the Nazis, her life was endangered not by virtue of her gender but by virtue of her Jewishness. In a profound way, the Nazis simply imposed on Arendt a centering of her Jewishness and a decentering of her gender. (Bar On, 2002, 80; cf. Bar On 1996, 299-301)

What then is "Arendt's Zionist experience" and "Arendt's Jewishness" that the theorists that I have discussed above frequently call attention to? How have these notions been understood by feminist scholars and why are they relevant for feminist analyses of Arendt's work? I have touched upon Arendt's notions of the "pariah" and the "parvenu" in the context of my discussion on Benhabib's interpretation of the social in Arendt (chapter 2). To clarify my argument, I will briefly restate the meaning of these terms here.

In her texts on Jewish politics, published posthumously as the anthology *The Jewish Writings* (2007), Arendt argues that historically, various coping mechanisms were born in conjunction with the dawn of modern anti-Semitism. Some of the Jewish ways of responding to anti-Semitism were to adapt the identity of a "parvenu" or a "pariah."

The parvenu tries to escape persecution by assimilating and dissolving into mainstream society, with the price of compromising one's difference to the extent of denying it. The pariah, on the other hand, lives as an eccentric outcast, excluded from society and disappears into the margins of society. According to Arendt, both the parvenu and the pariah escape participating in *political* resistance. As an alternative to this double-exclusion Arendt presents the concept of *the conscious pariah*, who accepts the challenge and responsibility that comes with being an excluded outcast. The conscious pariah understands the gross injustice in the logic of exclusion, embraces difference, and fights for full political and legal recognition openly, *as a Jew* (e.g. Parvikko 1996, 58). I will return to interpretations of the relevance of these concepts in detail in the following chapter, since these concepts in particular have been utilized in readings drawing an analogy between persecution of Jews and persecution of sexual minorities. In the remaining part of my current discussion, however, I want to at first briefly attend to two often-cited transcripts in which Arendt reflects on her relation to Jewish identity in a way that can be understood as a form of conscious pariahdom. I will then turn to examine some responses and questions that these characterizations of "Jewishness" have given rise to. Finally, I will analyze some examples of how Arendt's notion of the "conscious pariah" has been interpreted as a type of a "performative identity" and utilized for feminist purposes.

### ***Multiple meanings of pariahdom***

In a 1964 interview for German television with Günter Gaus, Arendt tells that her commitment to political action happens to have a specific date. According to her, it began from an impulse of responsibility, on the night of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1933, when the German Reichstag was burned down (EU, 4-5). In the years that followed, Arendt joined the Zionist movement and assisted Jewish children to escape from Nazi Germany to historical Palestine. However, she soon became highly critical of the Zionists and left the group. In her writings from the mid-1940s, Arendt had argued in favor of an Arab-Jewish federation, but the right-wing Zionists pushed for an Israeli nation-state based on religious and ethnic unity (Raz-Krakozkin 2001, 165-168). What is significant in the Gausinterview, is that in her own words, the "Jewish question" was something that Arendt had found quite boring in her youth. Coming from a leftist, secular intellectual background, she had not been raised religiously. Arendt's own personal interests were rather in German literature and philosophy. However, the increased political tension in the society she grew up in made her conscious of her Jewish identity. In other words, she was defined as "a Jew" from the outside. Even later in her life – for instance in the essay on Lessing that I have referred to

in the context of Amy Allen's reading of Arendt (chapter 5.2) – and in her correspondence with Karl Jaspers, Arendt always highlights her Jewish identity as a political identity, not an identity based on religious faith or ethnicity (HAKJ). Unlike Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, Arendt saw her scholarly work as being influenced by the tradition of German philosophy, not primarily by the Jewish tradition.

The experience of excitement, followed by great disappointment in the Zionist movement can be said to have shaped Arendt's political thinking. Despite her occasional involvement with political activism later on in her life, Arendt always referred to herself as a "political thinker," not as a philosopher, or an activist, and not even as a political theorist (Young-Buehl 1982). At a conference in Toronto in 1972, Hans Morgenthau from the New School for Social Research presented a very straightforward question regarding Arendt's political stance. He asked: "*What* are you? Are you conservative? Are you a liberal? Where is your position within the contemporary possibilities?" (Morgenthau quoted in Hill 1979, 333, my emphasis). I will quote Arendt's response at length:

I don't know. I really don't know and I've never known. And I suppose I never had such a position. You know the left think I'm a conservative and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am maverick or God knows what. And I must say, I couldn't care less. I don't think the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing. I don't belong to any group. You know the only group I ever belonged to were the Zionists. This was because of Hitler, of course. And this was from 1933-43. And after that I broke. The only possibility to fight back as a Jew and not a human being – which I thought was a big mistake, because *if you are attacked as a Jew, you've got to fight back as a Jew*, you cannot say "Excuse me, I am not a Jew; I am a human being." This is silly. There was no other possibility, so I went into Jewish politics [...] I was never a socialist [...] I never was a communist. [...] I never was a liberal. [...] SO you ask me where I am. I am nowhere. I am really not in the mainstream or present or any other political thought. But not because I want to be so original – it so happens that I somehow don't fit." (Arendt in Hill 1979, 333-336, my emphasis)

In the quotation above, Arendt rejects all political "-isms" attributed to her. Yet, Arendt also claims that sometimes one is forced to highlight a particular identity for political purposes. Thus, one's identity is constructed through a continuous adjustment and negotiation with



social norms. Arendt points out that referring to something as vague and broad as our common humanity does not serve the cause when politically acting from the margins of society, or from the perspective of a persecuted and stigmatized group. This is precisely the point that Honig (1993, 1995) and Allen (1999) highlight in their interpretations of Arendt, and where they see a parallel between Jewishness and certain forms of feminist politics and solidarity (see also Hull 2002). If one is being attacked on account of one's ethnicity, gender, religion and/or sexual identity, then if one wishes to defend oneself *politically*, one is forced to take a standpoint and fight back *as* a member of that group, not as an abstract "human being."

As Elomäki (2012) has argued, numerous feminist interpreters of Arendt's work have found the tension between collective, political identity and personal identity a difficult theme to grasp in Arendt's thinking (Elomäki 2012, 66-111). Hence, the idea of some sort of a temporary and contingent identity politics may seem appealing. However, according to other theorists, such as Butler (2012), the riddle is not so easily resolved. Laine, Honig and Allen, for instance, do not inquire into, or problematize the meaning of the contention that one must stand up *as* "a Jew" or *as* "a woman." Even if the contention is understood as a performative self-constitution, as Honig would do, what exactly is being affirmed with pride here? Based on Arendt's response to Morgenthau as well as her letter to Scholem (which I have cited in chapter 1.2 of this study), Butler (2012) asks:

Do we know what it means to say she [Arendt] was a Jew as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument? Was she saying that she was only nominally a Jew: a matter of genetic inheritance or historical legacy or a mixture of the two? Was she saying that she was sociologically in the position of the Jew? [...] Indeed, one can see in her *Jewish Writings* that, from the 1930s through the 1960s, Arendt is struggling with what it means to be Jewish without strong religious faith and why it might be important to distinguish, as she does, between the secular and the assimilated Jew. (Butler 2012, 133-134)

This question also puzzles Ring, who states that, indeed a "[...] difficulty is that Judaism is a religion, although in our contemporary secular world, also a cultural or "ethnic" identity. A person can identify herself as a Jew, and yet not be an observant religious practitioner [...] how can a religion be said to have influence upon a nonreligious thinker, especially in areas not related to religion?" (Ring 1998, 276). Compare this to Butler: "As Hannah Arendt made it very clear in her early writings, Jewishness is not always the same as

Judaism. And, as she made clear in her evolving political position on the State of Israel, neither Judaism nor Jewishness necessarily leads to the embrace of Zionism [...]. One persistent question is, what is finally *Jewish* about Arendt's thought, if anything?" (Butler 2012, 117, 122, emphasis added). Ring solves the problem through an attempt to show where Arendt's thinking (according to Ring) bears similarities with the Talmudic tradition. Butler also points out some religious sources for Arendt's thinking, such as her conception of forgiveness in *The Human Condition* (Butler 2012, 122-123, 138).

However, Butler's overall project in *Parting Ways* (2012) is very different from that of Ring. The book continues and builds from Butler's theorization of the relationship between law and violence, discussed earlier in books such as *Precarious Life* (2004), *Who Sings the Nation State?* (2007) and *Frames of War* (2010). The focus is now on the question of whether it is not in fact a Jewish obligation to resist state violence, and if Zionism as a political ideology is used to justify Israeli state violence, then is it not an ethical obligation to resist Zionism? Thus, Butler works with writings from Jewish and Palestinian thinkers, such as Arendt, Primo Levi, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish, in order to articulate an ethics of non-violence as a critique and response to Israel's state violence and its self-declaration as a Jewish state. Instead of simply disclosing the state-sanctioned violence and war crimes carried out by the Israeli Defense Forces, for instance, Butler engages in a critical conversation with political Zionist ideologies in order to expose how Jewishness has been politicized and manipulated to sanction Israel's authoritarian and xenophobic politics. Arendt functions here as a theorist of plurality and "cohabitation" as well as a critic of Zionism.<sup>42</sup> The question of the relationship between Jewishness and gender in Arendt is brought up only briefly, and only with respect to Butler's earlier interpretation of Arendt's letter to Scholem (see my discussion in chapter 1.2).

<sup>42</sup> The ethics of non-violence is centered on Butler's idea of "cohabitation" – the fact that we are all born into a world in which we live among people that we did not chose to live with and with whom we may feel no belonging – and her belief that all lives are meaningful and grievable, and that all lives must be protected from destruction. Following Edward Said, Butler makes the intriguing claim that this "diasporic train of thought" and "ethics of dispersion" is something that characterizes the writings of both Palestinian and Jewish writers. Thus, her articulation of a Jewish ethics of non-violence is not something that she intends to be understood as exclusively Jewish. Through a reading of Said's interpretation of Freud's engagement with the figure of Moses, Butler makes room for a narration according to which Moses as an Egyptian was a figure who was both an Arab and a Jew. "...Said's text is something of a petition, an incitement to consider that 'displacement' characterizes the histories of both the Palestinian and the Jewish peoples and so, in his view, constitutes the basis of a possible, even desirable alliance" (Butler 2012, 29). This idea forms Butler's conception of binationalism, which does not merely mean political binationalism as in two peoples living in one state, but more importantly signifies an ethical binationalism through which "...two peoples, diasporic, living together, where the diasporic, understood as a way of attaining identity only with and through the other, becomes the basis for a certain binationalism" (ibid. 31).

I argue that despite the attractive analogy between Jewishness and gender in Arendt, upon closer examination, Arendt's relation to Jewish identity has puzzled scholars just as much as her silence has perplexed feminist theorists. Richard J. Bernstein (1996), for instance, inquires into Arendt's distinction between "Jewishness" as a mere autobiographical fact, and "Judaism" as a religious doctrine. According to Bernstein, Arendt fails to provide an understanding of what, according to her, makes a certain group of people a "people" (Bernstein 1996; 185 cf. Pulkkinen 2003, 225-226). Bernstein quotes a letter from Arendt to Jaspers, in which she states that: "...many Jews such as myself are religiously completely independent of *Judaism* yet are still Jews nonetheless" (HAKJ, 98). So on one hand Arendt claims that her Jewishness is indeed simply an indisputable, autobiographical fact, and on the other hand she contends that one can and must act politically *as a Jew* when under persecution (cf. Hull 2002, 132). Thus, like Butler, Bernstein asks: "[w]hat is distinctive about the *Jewishness* of the Jewish pariah? How does the Jewish conscious pariah differ from other kinds of conscious pariahs? [...] What is the content of being a Jew if Jewishness is severed from Judaism?" (Bernstein 1996, 185-186). The crux of the perplexity here is the normative ground for rights claims in the name of Jews *as Jews*, as well as the meaning of "being a Jew."

Bernstein concludes that Arendt's richest insight is her theorizing of marginalized, persecuted and stigmatized groups through the framework of coerced normalization, and the responsive strategies of assimilation or conscious resistance. "The conscious pariah accepts the responsibility and challenge of being the outcast and the outsider. *The pariah is a rebel* and an independent thinker who rejects the type of assimilation that requires her to lose her identity and become indistinguishable from 'abstract individuals'" (ibid. 44, my emphasis). According to Bernstein, Arendt thus provides a framework through which to conceptualize *all* kinds of marginalized, stigmatized and persecuted groups. However, this framework is less successful in providing an understanding of what makes a certain group of conscious pariahs, conscious *Jewish* pariahs. Bernstein argues persuasively that this question is never answered by Arendt.

Nevertheless, as Bernstein points out, Arendt did not restrict the use of the term "conscious pariah" to Jewish pariahs exclusively and it has since then been utilized for theorizing feminist resistance (Bernstein 1996; e.g. Kaplan 1996). Bernstein criticizes "masculine Grecophile" accusations as the unfortunate, "standard feminist critique of Arendt." He then credits Honig's 1995 anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* and states:

[R]ecently [in 1996] there have been more subtle feminist readings of her work in which there is an appropriation of the “conscious pariah” as an exemplar of the situation of women who refuse to accept or assimilate to prevailing social relationships. There have been those who have argued that Arendt’s conception of politics and public spaces provides the basis for rethinking the possibility of feminist politics. A vital current in recent feminist readings of Arendt is the view that her thinking provides critical resources which can potentially illuminate and contribute to feminist concerns. (Bernstein 1996, 5)

Berstein locates this “vital current in recent feminist readings of Arendt” as taking place during the same time that Benhabib refers to the development of a “standard reading” of Arendt that she rejects (see Part I). In what ways, then, could a notion like a “feminist conscious pariah” function? Margaret Betz Hull (2002) draws an analogy between Arendt’s and the queer feminist Gloria Anzaldúa’s account of self-identity in order to illustrate how the conscious pariah can be understood as a performative identity (cf. Bickford 1995).

Gloria E. Anzaldúa [sic] takes a similar approach [as Arendt] with her multifaceted minority status. Anzaldúa, who describes herself as a ‘Third World lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings’ then asks herself the question, “But who exactly *are* my people? *Identify as a woman. Whatever insults women insults me. Identify as gay. Whoever insults gays insults me. Identify as feminist. Whoever slurs feminism slurs me*” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981: 206). Anzaldúa’s point is that different facets of her persona demand political attention and activism when specifically under attack, but that no one facet captures her political commitments entirely on its own. Perhaps most importantly, Anzaldúa makes clear that she is all of these qualities in combination at any given time, with no one ever entirely defining her. Like Anzaldúa, Arendt’s invocation of her Jewishness is a performative act, not a statement of fixed identity.” (Hull 2002, 138, emphasis in the original)

Susan Bickford (1995) like Hull has also drawn an analogy between Anzaldúa and Arendt. For Bickford, it is important to distinguish between the fact of someone being stereotyped and the fact of someone not otherwise being heard, or being misheard. The latter two are examples of inevitable possibilities in political, agonistic speech and action, whereas being stereotyped is a violation of that person’s uniqueness and distinctness. “Speaking as

‘a Jew’ was a necessity brought about by the existence of totalitarian regimes who used social identities to determine not only who could be citizens, but who could live as humans on earth. Under such conditions, Arendt could only resist ‘in terms of the identity under attack.’” (Bickford 1995, 326).

I want to next elaborate further on feminist interpretations of resisting in the name of the “conscious pariah.” In the following chapter, I will argue that gay studies and queer theoretical approaches have pointed out that in Arendt’s early Jewish writings as well as in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her ideal citizen and hero turns out to be, not the muscular, virile, mythic Greek man, nor the American civic republican, but the oppressed outcast and rebel, the “conscious pariah.” Arendt’s hero is thus the underdog, and this figure takes numerous different identities both in Arendt’s writings, as well as in interpretations of her work, depending on the historical and political context of oppression. As “effeminacy” has historically been associated with “lack of fitness for citizenship and the active involvement in state activities” (Hennen 2001, 129), gay studies and queer theoretical readings find an important link between effeminacy and second class citizenship explored in Arendt’s texts. Based on my analysis of secondary literature, I argue that despite her silence on gender, Arendt’s explicit reflections on Jewishness and homosexuality in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* have influenced theoretical developments of male vulnerability and non-normative masculinities. I will turn to these themes in the following, final chapter of this study.

## 6. Queering the "masculine Grecophile"

Since the late 1980s, a number of gay and queer studies scholars have used Arendt as an ally for theorizing lesbian and gay rights as well as for understanding how the "closet" operates in the production of myths about sexuality, race and gender (eg. Kramer 1989; Kaplan 1997; Eribon 1999; Brenkman 2002; Mason 2002; Warner 2002; Feit 2011).<sup>43</sup> Yet, to date, there has been no systematic examination of the marginal, but growing trend of gay and queer studies voices within feminist scholarship on Arendt, despite the fact that by rejecting the binary logic of gender and sexuality as either woman/man, female/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual, these readings offer a novel angle to Arendt's enigmatic silence on gender. In the following, I offer a reading of gay and queer responses to Arendt's silence on gender.

I argue that the "queer-readings of Arendt" are an offshoot of postmodern, feminist Arendt receptions. I start by analyzing Didier Eribon's (1999) interpretation of Arendt as "the philosopher of the gay movement." Eribon picks out same-sex marriage as an example of government-enforced discrimination and uses Arendt to defend marriage equality. Next, I move to examine Moris B. Kaplan's (1997) "queering of Arendt." Interestingly, both Eribon and Kaplan use Arendt's reading of Marcel Proust to theorize and articulate the plight of non-normative sexualities and genders. Important in these attempts to theorize Arendt as an ally for gay rights politics is also the paralleling of Arendt and Michel Foucault. However, in contrast to Eribon, Moris B. Kaplan questions the usefulness of identity politics by reading Arendt through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (1991). Kaplan elaborates particularly on the complexity with which race, gender, sexuality and disability become interlinked in 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semitic and homophobic discourse. Hence, in both Eribon's and Kaplan's interpretations, the "conscious pariah" functions as the most important operational concept. Finally, in the last chapter of this part, I examine Mario Feit's further development of Kaplan. Feit presents a unique interpretation of Arendt's notion of "natality" as a concept that establishes

<sup>43</sup> To my knowledge one of the first theorists on Arendt's relevance for gay rights is Larry Kramer, the founder of ACT UP, in his highly controversial and deliberately confrontational *Reports from the Holocaust: The Story of an AIDS Activist* (1989). Kramer accuses certain groups of gay men for selfish sexual hedonism and lack of responsibility during the early AIDS pandemic in the US. Drawing from Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Kramer compares gay community leaders— who collaborated with what Kramer takes to be the heterosexual mainstream society — to Jewish leaders who collaborated with the Nazis. He defines the AIDS pandemic as a Holocaust.

Arendt as a queer critique of heteronormativity.<sup>44</sup>

### 6.1. Arendt, “the philosopher of the gay movement”

Arendt’s fear of enforced conformism, “the tyranny of the majority” and assimilation of marginal identities brings Didier Eribon’s attention to the discussion of the social construction of “Jewishness” and “homosexuality” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). In the first part of this work, titled *Antisemitism*, Arendt reads Marcel Proust’s *Cities of the Plain (Sodome et Gomorrhé)* in order to give an account of how Proust’s depiction of the “accursed race” (homosexuals) serves as an excellent analogy for understanding the role of Jews in a primarily non-Jewish, anti-Semitic society. Eribon’s study of Arendt is an appendix attached to his vast study on the history of gay subjectivation. He argues that making an alliance between Arendt and gay rights – or even a defense of minority rights for that matter – might come as a surprise.<sup>45</sup> Eribon’s underlying assumption is that most of his readers will hold Arendt’s theorization of politics and political agency as elitist and exclusivist (Eribon 1999/2004, 339). He defends and justifies his decision to take up Arendt in a study on homosexuality by stressing that certain aspects of Arendt’s work are in fact excellent for theorizing minority rights. Before turning to these aspects of Arendt’s work, I want to at first ingeminate Arendt’s political interpretation of Proust, since this text is Eribon’s main resource.

Due to the fact that Proust himself was a social climber and an active socialite in the high society salons of Paris, Arendt claims that “[t]here is no better witness, indeed of this period when society had emancipated itself from public concerns...” (OT 80). In other words, Proust observed the *fin de siècle* salon life with ethnographic detail and used it as

<sup>44</sup> The term “heteronormativity” has multiple uses in queer theoretical literature (e.g. Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990; Warner 1991). The view according to which people fall into two distinct, naturally hierarchical categories of gender (men and women) – and according to which heterosexuality is the natural and normal relationship between men and women – was first critiqued by Adrienne Rich in her 1980 article “Compulsory Heterosexuality.” Michael Warner coined the term “heteronormativity” in his 1991 article “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet.” The term has since then been problematized by theorists such as Calvin Thomas, who in his *Straight with a Twist* (1999) argues that the term “queer” should not be theorized as the opposite of heterosexuality because some heterosexual persons live a queer form of heterosexuality (see also Ruffolo (2009) *Post-Queer Politics*). Also transgender studies problematize the simplistic use of the term “heteronormativity” since transgender persons are often heterosexual and queer (Halberstam 1998; 2005). In his reading of Arendt, Mario Feit does not elaborate on the meaning of heteronormativity, but follows a popular and conventional understanding of the term as implying the social norms according to which people are hierarchically arranged into men, women, hetero- and homosexual.

<sup>45</sup> In addition to her reluctance to take seriously questions related to feminist theorizing, Arendt does not seem to have much understanding of gender diversity. For her view on “hermaphroditism,” see Pulkkinen (2003, 224).

material for *In Search of Lost Time*.<sup>46</sup> I take it that the reason why precisely Proust's, and not for example Oscar Wilde's or Walt Whitman's depiction of homosexuality is important for Arendt, is that Proust discloses how the salons accepted gay men not because of an open attitude, but because they were perceived as displaying an exotic, secret, perverse, repulsive and monstrous, yet intriguing psychic life. Gay men served as a voyeuristic supply for the bored, bourgeois socialites, who were always preying on new forms of entertainment (OT 81-82). Arendt argues that "[t]he role of the inverts [Proust's term for homosexual] was to show their abnormality" (OT 85). The "vice" (homosexuality) of these men was seen as "[...] an inherent, psychological quality which man cannot choose or reject but which is imposed upon him from without, and which rules him as compulsively as the drug rules the addict" (OT 80). Because of the assumed innate psychic disposition of their perversion, the crime of homosexuality was now seen as a "racial predestination" and hence these men were held to be "predestined to commit certain crimes" (OT 81).<sup>47</sup> I will quote Arendt at length to illustrate her insight:

The Faubourg Saint-Germain [...] as Proust depicts it was in the early stages of this development. It admitted inverts because it felt attracted by what it judged to be a vice. Proust describes how Monsieur de Charlus, who had formerly been tolerated, "notwithstanding his vice," for his personal charm and old name, now rose to social heights. He no longer needed to lead a double life and hide his dubious acquaintances, but was *encouraged* to bring them into the fashionable houses. Topics of conversation which he formerly would have avoided – love, beauty, jealousy – lest somebody suspect his anomaly, were now welcomed avidly "in view of the experience, strange, secret, refined and monstrous upon which he founded" his views.

<sup>46</sup> The most famous and most explicit depiction of the attitude towards homosexuality is found in the characters of Monsieur de Charlus and Jupien, whose sexual relationship the narrator in *Cities of the Plain* observes.

<sup>47</sup> There is an interesting and disturbing parallel between 19<sup>th</sup>-century legitimization of so-called scientific, anti-Semitic attitudes and the contemporary judicial use of "homosexual panic." For instance, as Jonathan Freedman writes regarding anti-Semitism: "'The Jewish question is universal and elusive,' wrote one avowed anti-Semitic author in the 1890s. 'It cannot truly be expressed in terms of religion, nationality or race. The Jews *themselves* seem destined so to arouse the passions of those with whom they come in contact.'" (Freedman 2002, 523, italics added). This same logic of argumentation is common to the homophobic and transphobic defense of perpetrators in hate crime cases, namely, that there is something innate about the victim that provokes violence. An example of this history is the solution to hate crimes proposed by the Miami police in 1954: "[...] homosexuals needed to be tracked down and expelled from [bars and beaches] because their existence impelled heterosexuals to kill them" (Cain 2000, 86-87). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that the underlying assumption in the judicial use of "homosexual panic" is that *all* gay men (and/or trans women for that matter) make sexual offerings, advances or suggestions to unknown men and that hence "[...] violence, often to the point of homicide, is a legitimate response to any sexual advance whether welcome or not [...]" (Sedgwick 1990, 19).



Something very similar happened to the Jews [...] [N]ow Jews as such were becoming increasingly popular. In both cases, society was far from being prompted by a revision of prejudices. They did not doubt that homosexuals were “criminals” or that Jews were “traitors”; they only revised their attitude toward crime and treason. (OT 81, italics added)

As can be seen from the paragraph above, Arendt uses Proust’s account to elaborate on how the very same dialectic of attraction-repulsion operated in the production of both “homosexuals” and “Jews” as pathological races in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The various high society cliques presented Jewish and gay social climbers with (pseudo) scientific knowledge and unarticulated expectations about their psychic and physical composition, with the intention of making them doubt their own sense of self. “When society disintegrates into cliques such demands are no longer made by the individual but of members of the cliques. Behavior then is controlled by silent demands and not by individual capacities, exactly as an actor’s performance must fit into the ensemble of all the roles in the play” (OT 84-85, italics added). Because of their desire to fit in and belong, the targets of this social gaslighting<sup>48</sup> accepted, internalized and repeated the false projections of their psyche as pathological, perverted and vicious. “In this equivocal situation, Jewishness was for the individual Jew at once a physical stain and a mysterious personal privilege, both inherent in a ‘racial predestination’” (OT, 82). Arendt claims that finally, “Jewish origin, without religious and political connotation, became everywhere a psychological quality, was changed into ‘Jewishness’” (OT 83). Hence, just as “homosexuality” became a *species*, Jewishness became a “race” in anti-Semitic discourse.

Eribon is fascinated with the affinity between Arendt and Foucault in this context, and suggests that Foucault might in fact have been inspired by Arendt’s text:

One might wonder if this text [*The Origins of Totalitarianism*] is not one of the hidden sources for Foucault’s *La Volonté de savoir* [*The History of Sexuality* I], especially for the moment in which he describes the nineteenth-century invention by psychiatry of the personage of the “homosexual,”

<sup>48</sup> I use the term “social gaslighting” (my own term) to describe the inception of certain social norms on a subject, even when these norms at first contradict a person’s own perception and understanding of his or her own mental and physical health. The term “gaslighting” originates from Patrick Hamilton’s 1938 play *Gaslight* and has previously been used widely in the context of mental abuse, to refer to a specific manipulation technique through which a person is presented with flawed information and led to doubt his or her own sanity. I take it that “social gaslighting” is a similar but more complex phenomenon, through which, for instance, homosexual and transgender persons are led to believe that they are suffering from a mental disorder.

an invention that happens by way of the incorporation as a perversion of what had up until then been thought of as a crime (Foucault 1990, 43). Arendt's volume was translated into French in 1973, and Foucault's book was published in 1976. (Eribon 1999/2004, 417 n18)

In *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la Prison)* Foucault examines how the modern penal system led to the diffusion of criminology, psychiatry, anthropology and pedagogy by treating the criminal as an object of science (Foucault 1995, 17-18). What was now being punished was no longer the act of the crime, but the "soul" of the criminal. Foucault illustrates carefully how this event coincides with the transformation of religious confession to a secular form of confession and testimony. The criminal was thus supposed to speak about his intentions and motivations. This analysis is extended in *The History of Sexuality (Histoire de la sexualité)* by what Foucault names the birth of *scientia sexualis*, the science and policing of sexuality and the formation of new types of subjectivities.<sup>49</sup> Just like the modern prison system invented new categories and types of criminals, or put name tags on them so to speak, so too the various discursive practices around sex throughout the past three centuries gave birth to new types of psychological identities, such as "the homosexual," "the transvestite," "the sadomasochist" and so on (Foucault 1990, 40, 43). Treating various acts and forms of pleasure as something that could be categorized, conceptualized, analyzed and studied quantitatively and qualitatively, the modern, Western psychiatric sciences together with other forms of medical discourse ended up once again blurring the distinction between life-forms, illnesses and criminality, producing formerly unknown "truths" about sex (Foucault 1990, 65-67). The whole point of the *scientia sexualis* is to make us speak, to confess, to "come out," to take positions, make distinctions and define one's identity as something that fits the categories of the normalizing and pathologizing power-matrix. Eribon points out that in Arendt's writings on anti-Semitism, precisely this same logic operates in the production of truths about "race."

Through the creation of the salon, figures such as Rahel Varnhagen and Marcel Proust attempted to become "normal," as members of respectable German and French high

<sup>49</sup> Foucault argues that the Western *scientia sexualis* takes pleasure as its object of knowledge-production and molds it violently into "truths" about "sex" and "sexuality." As a counter-example, Foucault claims that the non-Western *ars erotica*, on the other hand, has bodily agency as its central focus and treats pleasure as the outcome of bodily and spiritual skills. Sexual pleasure and intimacy are thus something unique and individual, taking all kinds of forms because each unique body has its own way of producing pleasure through the practice of *ars erotica*. In other words, the *ars erotica* does not categorize and pathologize certain acts of pleasure as "masturbation," "fellatio" or "sodomy," because these are taxonomies of Western, medical and clinical power-discourses (Foucault 1990, 57-58; cf Sedgwick 1990, introduction).

society, and in the process ended up compromising and conforming to the very same social order that had led to their being political discriminated in the first place (JP, 71, 76-78). The salon represents for Arendt a dream-like world which allows for an escape from political reality. Thus, the political factors contributing to one's discriminated position in society are not dealt with. Instead they are ignored.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, Arendt argues that the logic behind the final destruction of Jews was the following: "Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness there was no escape. A crime, moreover, is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated" (OT, 87). When Jews were conceived as a pathological race, it did not matter whether they converted to Christianity or not. Even as converted Christians, they were still racially predestined to commit crimes and hence the only solution to the "Jewish question" was the annihilation of the entire race.

As I have argued previously, Arendt's alternative to this double-exclusion is the concept of *the conscious pariah*, who accepts the challenge and responsibility that comes with being an excluded outcast. The conscious pariah understands the gross injustice in the logic of exclusion, embraces difference, and fights for full political and legal recognition openly, *as a Jew*. I will next turn to examine how Eribon carries over the pariah/parvenu framework into gay studies scholarship in order to theorize the political situation of the closeted and openly gay person.

### ***Theorizing marriage equality with Arendt***

The pariah/parvenu dialectic is something that Eribon values greatly and where he locates Arendt's potential as "the philosopher of the gay movement" (Eribon 1999/2004, 349). The figure of the conscious pariah resists social conformism and fights publicly against legal and political discrimination. Eribon explains how one can escape the gridlock of exclusion:

<sup>50</sup> Here the importance of Arendt's critique of the social is the significance of social conformism in the birth of political anti-Semitism. As a student of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), Arendt was well aware that often reaching consensus through public opinion is actually not a sign of a functioning deliberative democracy (as Habermas claims) but instead an element of the "tyranny of the majority" (HC, 39; cf. Villa 2008, 85-86). As the Nuremberg race laws – or later the Jim Crow laws and related apartheid legislation – came into power, social assimilation became impossible, since state-sanctioned political rights were based on ethnicity and, finally, an ethnically homogenous conception of nationality. A central thesis as well as a major topic of concern in Arendt's analysis of the history of anti-Semitism is that Jews all over Europe lacked proper political organizing in their resistance (HC, 54-56). Thus Jews, according to Arendt "always had to pay with political misery for social glory and with social insult for political success" (OT, 54-55). This according to her was also the case of Rahel Varnhagen (cf. Parvikko 1996).

*Only* those representatives of the group who make an effort to speak *as* conscious pariahs, as rebellious ones, will be in any position to *escape from their predetermination* and work against the absence of the group as such from the historical and political arena. (Eribon 1999/2004, 348, italics added.)

The parallel to so-called openly gay persons and closeted ones is obvious. Eribon claims that here is also Arendt's potential for feminist politics. He acknowledges feminist critiques of Arendt and refers explicitly to Adrienne Rich's objection: "[i]ndeed, a certain amount of feminists have severely criticized Arendt for defining the common world in such a way that access to it seems reserved to men" (Eribon 1999/2004, 344). Yet, continues Eribon, Arendt's conception of plurality is "open to the expansion of thought that cannot help but be produced by the advent of new ways of looking at the world. Feminism is part of this expansion" (Eribon 1999/2004, 345). To back up his argument and to also make a connection between feminism and the gay and lesbian plight, Eribon refers to Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (1996):

"[...] if as Benhabib's rereading of Arendt suggests, it is possible [within Arendt's framework] to think that *women as a group* and as *the* point of view on the world are justified in taking part in the shaping of the public space, then it is just as legitimate to think that gay men and lesbians could henceforth also constitute a point of view (or several points of view) that would contribute to "enlarging" thought. (Eribon 1999/2004, 345, my emphasis)

Eribon thus suggests that within the framework of the "conscious pariah," openly gay men and lesbians as well as feminist activists can be seen as the "rebellious ones" who heroically express their opinions publicly and hence fight against legal and political discrimination. One crude form of discrimination is the prohibition of same sex couples marrying. Eribon draws from Arendt's provocative and controversial essay "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959), in which she writes that "the right to marry whoever one wishes" should be conceived as an inalienable human right, secured by the Constitution and furthermore, that "[e]ven political rights, like the right to vote, and nearly all other rights enumerated in the Constitution, are secondary to the inalienable human rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence; and to this category the right to home and a marriage unquestionably belongs" (RJ, 203). For Eribon, Arendt's passionate opposition to southern anti-miscegenation laws – also known as Jim Crow laws – can be used as

leverage for legitimizing arguments in favor of same-sex marriage. This is because both cases represent a form of discriminatory social engineering.

But how should we understand “women as a group” in the passage above? Eribon’s argument rests here on identity politics, and collapses “women,” “gay men” and “lesbians” as unified and homogenous groups. He solves the complex dynamics of exclusion and discrimination by proposing the institution of marriage as a guarantee for equality. The argumentative leap from 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semitic France and Germany to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century European feminist and gay liberation movements brings a further element of abstractness to his argument.

Interestingly, in “Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Public Space” (1993), Benhabib also draws from Arendt’s essay “Reflections on Little Rock” and Arendt’s defense of the right to marry whomever one wishes. To my knowledge, Benhabib is the only feminist reader of Arendt to make use of the gay rights plight for theorizing feminist politics. However, Benhabib’s focus is not on the social construction of “homosexuality” as such, nor the linkage between race, gender, sexuality and disability in anti-Semitic discourse. Instead, Benhabib shows that in this same context, Arendt contends that the right to a home and to establish a home should be a basic human right. Crucial to Benhabib’s formulation is the fact that the concept of “home” blurs Arendt’s own distinctions between the private and the public. This is because the most fundamental human right for Arendt is the “right to have rights,” which means the right to “...live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions and a right to belong to some kind of an organized [political] community” (OT 296-97, cf. HC 198). Yet, she also says that the right to a home and the right to marriage – which according to her belong to the private sphere – should be considered fundamental human rights. Hence, certain aspects of the private can and must be politicized according to Arendt herself, claims Benhabib. This goes contrary to the early second wave critique of Arendt as someone who makes a rigid, even despotic distinction between the public and the private.

Benhabib elaborates her point by stressing the strong resemblance between Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and Arendt’s conception of the home. According to Benhabib, the home is for Arendt something that she at times characterizes as “...a space that provides the self with a center, with a shelter, with a place in which to unfold capacities, dreams and memories” (Benhabib 1993, 107). This concept of “privacy” is something that Benhabib claims “...feminist theorists must not only share but also cultivate” (ibid.)

[T]he gay liberation movements in the last two decades have also made public that there are many ways to be a family and share a home. [...] What form of sexual relations best expresses intimacy can no longer be dictated in terms of categories of biologically grounded gender identity [...]. Although this explication expands Hannah Arendt's categories considerably and takes them in directions which she herself could not have anticipated, they are compatible with her deep reflections on the meaning of the private sphere. (Benhabib 1993, 107-108)

According to Benhabib then, "[...] contemporary feminist theory, in its refusal to articulate a positive conception of privacy, has undermined some of its own emancipatory thrust" (ibid., 100). She credits "the gay liberation movement" for providing new ways to understand domesticity and partnership. Benhabib's interpretation – just like that of Eribon – focuses on contemporary rights struggles, and hence pushes Arendt into directions that she herself did not envision. According to Morris B. Kaplan, there is an even deeper insight in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that neither Eribon nor Benhabib pays attention to. This is the relationship between certain, heteronormative forms of gendering and the production of second class citizenship. In what follows, I will elaborate on this aspect.

## **6.2. "The Jew" and "the homosexual" as effeminate species**

Paralleling Eribon's and Benhabib's analyses of Arendt's importance for theorizing gay rights during the 1990s brings us to the problem of the private and the public in a new light, namely in the form of the paradox of the "closet." So called "gay rights" are unique from other rights claims in the sense that they involve the necessary, public disclosing of one's sexual identity, which is an intimate aspect of one's life. Yet, on the other hand, as history shows, in situations with no constitutional basis for protection from legal discrimination, gay men and lesbians (not to mention other forms of non-normative sexualities and genders) as "conscious pariahs" face serious risks, such as being imprisoned, institutionalized or killed.

Morris B. Kaplan (1997), just like Eribon, argues that Arendt's analysis of Jews and homosexuals in the context of modern anti-Semitism has significant relevance for contemporary queer political theorizing. Writing in the political and historical context

of the U.S still under sodomy laws,<sup>51</sup> Kaplan passionately defends the rights of "queer citizens" with reference to Arendt's theorizing of the history of anti-Semitism as well as Arendt's contention that the government must make sure that practices of discrimination are not legally enforced. This last point is particularly important, as governments often regulate populations through sophisticated and silent practices:

I use Arendt's analysis of the Jewish question in modern Europe [...] to investigate fundamental dilemmas of sexual minorities within modern democracy, especially the tensions between aspirations to political equality and the facts of social difference. [...] Although my focus here is on the movement for lesbian and gay rights, and on queer politics more generally, these concerns necessarily intersect with those of the women's movement and of racial, religious, and national minorities. Some of Arendt's politics that at first blush seem inimical to the concerns of the oppressed have great potential for shedding light on the particular turns that social movements have taken in our time. (Kaplan 1997, 153-154)

Kaplan's analysis is more amplified than Eribon's, and focuses on "queer politics" and "queer citizenship" in general, rather than simply on same-sex marriage. Contrary to Eribon, Kaplan rejects identity politics as a viable option for the lesbian and gay liberation movement. He contends that "identities are not inherent and fixed, but constructed and revised through ongoing interaction" (Kaplan 1997, 154). In line with Bonnie Honig (1993), Kaplan holds that Arendt's notion of plurality must be understood as entailing perspectivism and relationality. Arendt "[...] rejects any conception of a sovereign self or unitary subject underlying the capacity to act. In a Nietzschean vein, she sees the deed itself as that through which a doer comes to be" (Kaplan 1997, 155). Hence, for Kaplan, there is something potentially queer about Arendt's notion of the self and agency, which he is willing

<sup>51</sup>In the U.S context, the most dramatic example of discrimination based on sexual identity is the 1986 Supreme Court ruling in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. The case concerned the arrest of Michael Hardwick in his own bedroom for having had sex with another male. The court ruled that the constitutional right to privacy did not include private consensual homosexual sodomy, because under the prevailing *sodomy laws*, homosexual sodomy was not only immoral but also criminal. "No connection between family, marriage, or procreation on the one hand and homosexual conduct on the other has been demonstrated." It took 17 years for the Supreme Court to change its standing. In *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) – an almost identical case to *Bowers v. Hardwick* – the Supreme Court ruled that the state of Texas had acted unconstitutionally when raiding the home of John Lawrence and arresting him for having engaged in sodomy with another male. One of the main arguments was that under the 14th Amendment equal protection clause, the sodomy laws of the state of Texas were unconstitutional since they forbade sodomy between members of the same sex but not between members of opposite sexes. The law also violated privacy rights. For more on the history of Supreme Court rulings on male and female homosexuality, see Cain (2000).

to take much further than Eribon and Benhabib. Well aware of the popularity of Proust among gay studies scholars, Kaplan queers Arendt's notion of the "conscious pariah" by reading Arendt in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). I will quote Kaplan at length to emphasize the difference between his interpretation and that of Eribon and Benhabib as well as in order to show why this difference is important:

This description of the situation of assimilated Jews bears an uncanny resemblance to that of homosexuals whose lives are structured by the closet. The contradiction between public persona and personal existence falsifies both domains; trying "to be a Jew at home and a man in the streets" generated intolerable strains. *Homosexuals in the closet* are analogous to the parvenus, while *out gays* become pariahs. Arendt's "conscious pariah" adopts the stance of today's ironic but engaged and *self-affirming queer*. [...] Hannah Arendt's analysis of the impact of anti-Semitism on newly emancipated, assimilating Jews in European society in the nineteenth century resonates richly with Sedgwick's work on the dynamics of the closet in organizing discourses of homophobia: lesbians and gays are consigned to a regime of silence and discretion, subjected to a knowing social gaze that defines us as both radically "other" and perfectly transparent. (Kaplan 1997, 162-163, italics added)

Unlike Eribon, who applauds the process of "coming out" – in other words affirming and disclosing one's identity – and who claims that by coming out one becomes a "rebel" and a "conscious pariah," Kaplan holds that "the self-affirming queer" as the "conscious pariah" is conscious of the deceptive and fallacious closet construct itself. Arendt's notion of "the conscious pariah" as an analogy to the "self-affirming queer" is attractive to Kaplan because more than Eribon, Kaplan is interested in multiple forms of queer political organizing and queer intimacy, not simply the right to be included in the marriage institution.

By making this argument Kaplan comes close to contemporary queer activists and theorists, for whom recognition can no longer happen through an attempt to assimilate the margins into the mainstream society, in other words, make them parvenus. Let me take an example. In his book *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) Michael Warner describes the aim of queer politics in the following way:

[...] an ethical vision of queer politics [is] centered on the need to resist the state regulation of sexuality. Queer thought both before and after Stonewall



rested on [principles such as the following]: It resisted any attempt to make the norms of straight culture into the standards by which queer life should be measured [...] It insisted that any vision of sexual justice begin by considering the unrecognized dignity of outcasts, the ways of living they present, and the hierarchies of abjection they make secondary, invisible or deviant. (Warner 1999, 88-89.)

Nancy Polikoff (2008) also criticizes the institution of gay marriage, but from a different angle than Warner. Through an extensive analysis of U.S court cases Polikoff shows how the normalization process in legal discourses functions by offering the institution of marriage as the *only* available path to socio-economic benefits for same-sex couples. Warner and Polikoff end up making a highly resemblant point:

The most contested issue in contemporary family policy is whether married-couple families should have “special rights” not available to other family forms. Excluded families include unmarried couples of any sexual orientation, single-parent households, extended-family units, and any other constellation of individuals who form relationships of emotional and economic interdependence that do not conform to the one-size-fits-all marriage model. No other Western country, including those that allow same-sex couples to marry, creates the rigid dividing line between the law for the married and the law for the unmarried that exists in the United States. (Polikoff 2008, 2)

### ***Alternative masculinities as rejected masculinities***

As an alternative to the “out of the closet and into marriage” model, Kaplan is drawn to Sedgwick’s analysis of the “closet” as constitutive of the construction of “heterosexuality” as the norm and “homosexuality” as an abject. He uses Sedgwick’s insight to elaborate further on the concept of the “conscious pariah” in Arendt. Crucial to Kaplan’s analysis is a focus on the social construction not only of sexuality, but also of gender. Hence, Arendt’s silence on gender pushes Kaplan to test the boundaries of Arendt’s conceptual framework. In my view, more than Eribon and Benhabib, this approach both radicalizes Arendt’s potential for feminist politics as well as takes the discussion beyond what Arendt envisioned.

Why does Kaplan turn to Sedgwick? In her reading of Proust, Sedgwick elaborates on

the dynamics of concealment and disclosure, in other words “the spectacle of the closet,” in the historical construction of homosexuality. The “coming out,” or disclosing one’s homosexuality, is paradoxical, because the closet construct is intelligible only in relation to a heteronormative context. Heterosexuality is assumed as the norm, and hence there is no need to disclose one’s heterosexual identity. Lesbians, gay men, transgender persons and queer persons of color, for instance, must on the other hand be repeatedly either “outed,” or “come out” through various forms of speech and action, in other words participate in the performative speech act of what Foucault calls “confession,” and what Arendt describes as the attempt to become normal. Hence, the narrator in *Cities of the Plain* represents the social gaze that always has a potential “absolute epistemological privilege” over the “invert,” which is Proust’s term for the homosexual Baron de Charlus (Sedgwick 1990, 213, 230-232).

Inspired by Sedgwick and drawing from the culture historian Sander Gilman’s work *The Jew’s Body* (1991), Kaplan, just like Arendt, stresses the fact that because neither Jews nor homosexuals could be associated with any visible, physical markers – as was the case in colonialist racism and its association of race with skin color – these persons were held to be able to hide their inner, monstrous secret and “pass” as “normal” people. “This increasingly sharp focus of the Jewish question on the most private and intimate details of individual life among assimilated Jews produced a recognizable ‘Jewish type’” (Kaplan 1997, 163). Because they were non-existent, anti-Semitic (pseudo) scientific discourse had to invent physical and visible markers, – everything from the pitch of the voice to the texture of the hair to the size of body parts – to describe the “Jewish type” so that they could be recognized and “outed” (cf. Gilman 1991, 96-97; 178).<sup>52</sup>

Kaplan’s most original contribution to the queer readings of Arendt is his persistent highlighting of the linkage between race, gender, sexuality, disability and disease. One of the most important aspects of establishing anti-Semitic epistemological authority was to view Jewish men as fundamentally “effeminate” (Kaplan 1997; cf. Gilman 1991; Ring 1997). “Effeminacy” in this context does not only function as a symbolic means for controlling and policing the boundaries between so called real, “Aryan men” and “men of weaker races,” but more importantly, effeminacy is equated with pathology. Hence, “femininity” comes to mean “disease.” As Jonathan Freedman depicts in his essay “Coming out of the

<sup>52</sup> In the German TV interview with Günter Gaus (1964) Arendt elaborates on her own experience of being outed as different: “I did not know from my family that I was Jewish. My mother was completely a-religious...I come from an old Königsberg family. Nevertheless, the word ‘Jew’ never came up when I was a small child. I first met up with it through anti-Semitic remarks – they are not worth repeating – from children on the street. After that I was so to speak, ‘enlightened’” (EU, 6).

Jewish Closet with Marcel Proust”: “[...] in many anti-Semitic idioms, the sign of Jewish masculinity, circumcision, signifies castration, and the male Jew is identified as castrated or feminized or both – in other words as a man-identified-as-woman” (Freedman 2001, 522). The monstrosity of “the Jew” is thus not only his religious traitorism, and monetary manipulation, but a curious, gender and sexual ambiguity and perversion.

Freedman also draws from Sander Gilman’s historical research and notes further that “... the Jewish man was considered [already] in the medieval period to be a figure of biological indeterminacy, a man-woman capable of menstruating as a sign of his cursedness...” (ibid. 526) This myth of the Jewish man as inhabiting biological abnormalities is further pathologized by linking “effeminacy” to the image of the female prostitute. Jewish men were labeled as carriers and contaminators of various sexually transmitted diseases, syphilis most importantly. The anti-Semitic inventions of physical markers for the “Jewish type,” – such as the shape and size of the nose, or the complexion of the skin – were then interpreted as being visible symptoms of syphilis (Gilman 1991, 96, 123-124). This image of the Jew as a carrier and contaminator of syphilis is later popularized by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. For these reasons Larry Kramer (1989) parallels anti-Semitism and homophobia in his discussion of the ways in which the 1980s AIDS pandemic stigmatized gay men as sexually perverse carriers of disease. Both discourses rely on “hygiene” and “disease” (see also Bersani 1987/2009). I will turn to this thematic in more detail in chapter 6.3.

According to Kaplan, it comes as no surprise then that Proust used the anti-Semitic conception of “the Jew” as a model for his portrait of the “invert” or “sodomite,” and Arendt in fact does the reverse. The logic of racist argumentation is so similar. Kaplan notes that “Arendt does not comment on this complex erotic dynamic nor on its feminization of the homosexual. However, sexual ambiguity and gender inversion are central to Proust’s portrayal of the ‘race’ of homosexuals. We are again in the presence of the ‘third sex,’ defined most famously as the ‘female brain in a male’s body’” (Kaplan 1997, 167). Kaplan draws from the following, famous episode in *Cities of the Plain*, in which the narrator spies on two men having sex:

In M. de Charlus another creature might indeed have coupled itself with him which made him as different from other men as the horse makes the centaur [...] I had managed to arrive at the conclusion that M. de Charlus *looked like* a woman: he *was* one! He belonged to that race of beings, less paradoxical than they appear, whose ideal is manly simply because their temperament is feminine and who in their life resemble in appearance only

the rest of men [...]. Race upon which a curse weighs and which must live amid falsehood and perjury, because it knows the world to regard as a punishable and a scandalous, as an inadmissible thing, its desire... (Proust 1927, 19-20, italics added.)

Although Arendt does not elaborate on the feminization of Jewish and homosexual men, she nevertheless perceptively warns that “[a]s long as defamed groups and classes exist, parvenu- and pariah-qualities will be produced anew by each generation with incomparable monotony, in Jewish society and *everywhere* else” (OT, 66, my emphasis). Hence, the analysis of the production of excluded outcasts is something that Didier Eribon and Morris B. Kaplan see as the most fruitful and valuable tool in Arendt.

Kaplan holds furthermore that Arendt’s analysis is reminiscent of both Foucault and Sedgwick, and that Arendt can be amended with Sander Gilman’s genealogy of anti-Semitic medical discourse to make it compatible with contemporary queer and feminist politics (Kaplan 1997, 170). Why I take this to be particularly important with regard to my argument is that the same kind of obsession with producing detailed knowledge about the body and psyche of “the Jew” in anti-Semitic ideology is prevalent in early social and medical science on homosexuality, as well as in contemporary medical and psychological discourses and diagnostic practices of so called “gender identity disorder” (e.g. Bryant 2006; Green 1987). In all cases, a failure to conform to certain social norms, assumptions, or ideals, is characterized as an individual psychological pathology. This hinges back to Arendt’s distaste towards “the social,” “high society,” as well as her affinity with Tocqueville’s critique of the “tyranny of the majority.” More importantly, both discourses are built on an inherent, heteronormative logic. As Kaplan shows, “Gilman amply demonstrates the affinities between the racial rhetoric of ‘Jewishness’ and that associated with constructions of homosexuality as a third sex. [Like Jews], homosexual men were similarly feminized; and lesbians characterized as masculine women” (Kaplan 1997, 171). There is thus a deep and important “need to integrate interpretations of race and sexuality with an analysis of the rhetoric of feminization, the ideology of gender, and the political status of women” (Kaplan 1997, 172).

I want to return for a moment to the question of effeminacy. What I find intriguing in Eribon’s and Kaplan’s interpretations of Arendt, is that they point out how the figure of the “effeminate man,” whether a “Jew,” a “homosexual” or a person of a “third sex” functions to propel various racist, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic discourses. Hence, they both find an angle to address Arendt’s potential for feminist political theorizing not by looking at what

Arendt explicitly said or left unsaid about gender and sexuality, but instead by analyzing how gender and sexuality operates in her analysis of the rise of anti-Semitism and the rise of totalitarianism. The intriguing and disturbing problem that arises through this angle of interpretation is the fact that certain normative ways of gendering people seems to be a necessary step for justifying violent acts of annihilation, in this case Nazi genocide and the medicalization of “male effeminacy” as a psycho-pathology. Unlike the early second wave feminist interpretations of Arendt that I have discussed in chapter 1, and the feminist theorists of Part II, these “queer readings” point out a very important aspect of the construction of the modern nation-state, namely, that in 19<sup>th</sup>- century discourse, “effeminacy” and “pathology” go hand in hand with the shaping of notions of citizenship and that any group of people (not just women) associated with “effeminacy” has been a potential target for legitimate diagnosis of pathology and hence considered unfit for citizenship rights.

The framing of political freedom in Arendt that has been so attractive to queer theorists, such as Morris B. Kaplan, is that Arendt does not theorize freedom in relation to a sovereign or an autonomous subject. According to Kaplan, she does not hold freedom to be something that is possessed by an individual or a group. Neither is she interested in identity politics, but regards instead political freedom as always dynamic and relational, as the achievement of a heterogeneous group of conscious pariahs joining spontaneously in order to act together and start something new. Coming back now to the early second wave feminist critiques of Arendt (chapter 1), where the queer readings of Arendt respond to this critique is that Arendt is not concerned with formulating political agency in relation to an identity group, such as “women,” – or “gays” for that matter. Both are contingent, socially constructed concepts, not universal identities. Instead, her focus is on the question of what makes the political coming together possible in the first place?

In light of the queer readings, regardless of the fact that Arendt never wrote much on the topic of gender inequality or women’s rights, her theorizing on the complex process of exclusion facing all marginalized groups nevertheless turns out to be very useful for feminist and queer political theorizing. As Didier Eribon and Morris B. Kaplan argue, by going back to Arendt’s early *Jewish Writings* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it becomes evident that 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical interpretations of race and sexuality feed the development of gender ideologies that promote a negative conception of femininity, which again directly influences the political status of women and anyone associated with “effeminacy.” That this important point regarding Arendt’s continued relevance for feminism is made by theorists working within the discipline of gay studies and queer theory shows that sometimes

accusations of Arendt's "gender blindness" can in fact conceal her fresh refusal to conform with heteronormative conceptions of acceptable gender roles or "women" as a universal category.

In my discussion so far, all the formulations of Arendt as an important resource for theorizing gay rights are in one way or the other directly inspired by the figure of the "conscious pariah." As I have argued, these readings do not stress the philosophical, political or ethical implications of Arendt's silence on gender as such, but focus instead on examining what can be done with texts in which Arendt addresses homosexuality as a political question.

Whereas feminist interpreters such as Landes (1983), Ring (1998); Kristeva (1999), Bar-On (1997; 2002) and Courtine-Denamy (2001) inquire into the relationship between gender and Jewishness in Arendt's texts as well as her autobiography, and search for elements of a hidden feminism in Arendt, gay studies scholars, such as Kramer (1989), Kaplan (1997) and Eribon (1999) are interested in the medical, juridical, political and social construction of homosexuality and Jewishness as pathological identities. This leads to an important theoretical problem. Namely, in these texts the question of problematizing gender falls into the background, because gender is almost exclusively theorized as male. When the question of gender is extracted for critical scrutiny, it is done only within the context of the connection between male effeminacy and pathology. As I have argued, the focus is on *male* homosexuality, *male* desire and *male* effeminacy. With the exception of Gail Mason (2002), who has examined lesbian women's experiences of homophobic violence by appeal to Arendt, texts that would theorize lesbian politics, lesbian desire or female masculinity through an Arendtian framework are basically non-existent. As I have shown in my discussion in Part I, numerous feminist scholars, such as Adrienne Rich most notably, would regard Arendt as an enemy in such a project.<sup>53</sup> Mason on the other hand holds that Arendt, despite her silence on gender, is useful for theorizing the experiences of victims of violence because of her distinction between "who" someone is and "what" someone is (Mason 2002, 98-99):

<sup>53</sup> There are some studies that attempt to theorize friendship between women by studying the private correspondence between Mary McCarthy and Arendt, and some of these studies also speculate about the possible erotic dimension of some of Arendt's personal relationships with women (e.g. Jones 2013). However, these studies are highly marginal and conducted in the genre of autobiography. They draw from personal letters as well as third party memories of Arendt's personal life, not on her scholarly, public texts.

[A]lthough violence may contribute to the definition of ‘what’ homosexuality is, it cannot tell lesbians and gay men ‘who’ they are as homosexuals; I appropriate the work of Hannah Arendt to make this distinction. In other words, violence has the capacity to constitute sexual subject positions but it cannot determine the subjectivities through which these identities are lived and reinvented by lesbians and gay men every day. (Mason 2002, 10)

### **6.3 From “queer negativity” to queer natality: reading Arendt as a critic of heteronormativity**

In Part II of this study I analyzed French and Italian feminist interpretations of Arendt that are motivated by a framing of sexual difference. I argued that theorists such as Cavarero (1995) and Kristeva (1999), most importantly, highlight the femininity of Arendt’s textual style and draw feminist implications from her concept of “natality.”<sup>54</sup> For theorists such as Cavarero, the concept of natality opens up a possibility to theorize the mother-child relation as an ontological foundation for a philosophy of sexual difference and new beginnings. As Rachel Jones writes:

[j]ust as the capacity for beginning is rooted in birth and born of relations both sexuete and maternal, so philosophy itself is primarily relational. Philosophy’s course is thus first and foremost inter-course, just as human being is first and foremost being-with. (Jones 2012, 158; cf. Martin 2002)

In this chapter, I want to draw attention to texts in which Arendt’s notion of natality is interpreted and utilized for entirely different purposes than a philosophy of sexual difference. I will examine what happens to Arendt’s enigmatic silence on gender when natality and birth are not interpreted as feminine or even sexed concepts but are instead seen as concepts that disturb and interrupt the order of heteronormativity. As scholars working within the framework of academic queer theorizing, Judith Butler most notably, have criticized Kristeva’s psychoanalytic framework of motherhood for its alleged heteronormativity and essentialism, a concept such as “natality” and the philosophy of birth associated with it may seem foreign, perhaps even counterproductive for queer interpretations of Arendt. Yet, I attempt to show that for some theorists, such as John Brenkman (2002) and Mario Feit (2011) precisely “natality” signifies Arendt’s potential as a critic of heteronormativity.

<sup>54</sup> As I have established, in addition to Cavarero and Kristeva, the concept of natality has convinced thinkers as diverse as Hartsock (1983), Elshtain (1986), Moruzzi (2002) and Birmingham (2006), that albeit her enigmatic silence on gender, Arendt is a radical female writer and as such, her philosophy contains feminine themes that are significant for feminist theorizing.

Feit for instance contends:

Arendt's political theory develops a powerful, albeit implicit, critique of heteronormativity, that is [...]. Arendt emerges as a queer theorist...[She] has been criticized for her disinterest in questions of gender and sexuality. However, as I show, *The Human Condition* offers a thorough critique of heteronormativity. (Feit 2011, 77)

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the theoretical underpinnings of these attempts to “queer” Arendt's notion of natality. In an essay titled “The Future is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive” (1998), Lee Edelman claims that heteronormativity is being held in place by the “figural Child.” In other words, social and political order depends for its existence and legitimation on a certain future-orientedness, in the name of “future citizens” and “future generations.” Crucial to this order of “reproductive futurism” is the fantasy of achieving immortality through heterosexual reproduction. “The Child marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (Edelman 1998/2004, 21). Hence, politics receives its meaning from an aim to transcend death. Citizenship and rights become linked to sexual reproduction, leaving those who cannot, do not want to, or are not allowed to participate in “reproductive futurism” as abject:

In its coercive universalization, the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse – to prescribe what will count as political discourse – by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address. (Edelman 1998/2004, 11)

Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) presents one of the most provocative and controversial critiques of heteronormativity. Equivalizing the ideal of democratic politics with the ideals of future-orientedness and heterogenital reproduction, Edelman calls for a queer negation of this social order through the embracing of the death drive.<sup>55</sup> What this means for a queer account of politics is that queerness must stand in stark

<sup>55</sup>Edelman's critique of heteronormativity is best concretized by placing it in the context of the tradition of thinkers such as Leo Bersani, who in his 1987 essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” polemically and provocatively opposed Ronald Reagan's impotence and unwillingness to take action at the peak of the 1980s AIDS pandemic (cf. Bersani 1987/2009). The stigmatization of gay men as carriers and spreaders of HIV and the myth according to which the AIDS pandemic is an evolutionary process that



opposition to all politics: “[...] what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively – to insist that the future stop here” (Edelman 1998/2004, 31; cf. Kornak 2015).

Arendt’s account of natality as the “central category of political thought” (HC, 9) seems to stand in stark opposition to Edelman’s “queer-negativity.” In fact, Arendt’s philosophy of natality may even be seen as the epiphany of the type of political theorizing that Edelman criticizes. Yet, for Brenkman and Feit, precisely Arendt’s account of natality functions as momentum for disrupting the heteronormative order of reproductive future. In his debate and correspondence with Edelman, John Brenkman (2002) writes:

“Natality,” awkward though the word is, acquires a new relevance in light of Edelman’s “The Future Is Kid Stuff.” Arendt evokes the human and political significance of being born – of being thrown into the world as a newcomer and beginner – without linking it to any symbol of reproduction, any fantasy of the sexual relation, any image of the child and futurity. (Brenkman, 2002, 191)

Mario Feit (2011) shares Brenkman’s enthusiasm in theorizing Arendt through a non-heteronormative account of natality. In *Democratic Anxieties: Same-Sex Marriage, Death and Citizenship* (2011), Feit, much like Bersani (1987/2990) and Edelman (1998/2004), contends that in the Western political tradition, sexual reproduction functions as a means to transcend death. Biological reproduction and the creation of fit future citizens is the *sine qua non* for democratic citizenship.<sup>56</sup> Whereas heterosexual marriage is valued as normal and celebratory, same-sex marriage on the other hand is reduced to a selfish union of mere sexual desire without offspring, and as such it escapes the duties of citizenship (Feit 2011, 2-3). Edelman and Bersani both attempt to disrupt the heteronormative, reproductive order by appeal to “queer auto-erasure,” or “queer-negativity” and contend that male gay sexual praxis, precisely *because* of its disconnection with reproduction, is in itself politically subversive, courageous and celebratory (e.g. Bersani 1987/2009, 222). Feit, however,

will lead to the extinction of homosexual men, bears some affinity with the anti-Semitist narration of Jewish men as carriers of syphilis. For these and other reasons, Kramer (1989) rhetorically compares the AIDS crisis to a holocaust

<sup>56</sup> There seems to be some confusion within these theories regarding the definition of democratic citizenship. Edelman’s critique is best applied to homogenous notions of nationality (*demos*), or people (*populous*), but not necessarily to the concept of democratic citizenship, since not all notions of citizenship are based on the idea of the nation or the nation state. The Republican tradition in political philosophy, represented by thinkers such as Machiavelli (*Discourses on Livy*), Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Hannah Arendt is not based on the idea of citizenship as a homogenous people. Arendt follows the Founders in her notion of citizenship and certainly resists attempts to reduce citizenship to nationality.

looks to Arendt for a queer ally.

Feit's book builds on a critique of Rousseau, as well as on an elaboration of Nietzsche and Arendt in order to establish a theory of democratic, queer-inclusive citizenship. I want to stress here the continuity that Feit's book establishes among the marginal and often neglected gay studies scholars and queer theorists who have shown an interest in Arendt's works. Just as feminist interpreters of Arendt have managed to build a tradition of Arendtian feminist scholarship as well as feminist critiques of Arendt by means of cross-referencing to each other's works, also the marginal, but growing field of Arendtian queer theorizing is becoming a small tradition in itself. As I have argued throughout this chapter, this tradition is an offshoot of the feminist tradition, and yet it has remained unexamined.

Being well aware of the tradition of feminist Arendt scholarship as well as Arendt's controversial silence on gender, Feit nevertheless insists that Arendt can be read as a queer theorist. He credits Honig's edited anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995) in order to position himself among theorists who have examined Arendt's silence on gender. "As Arendt's work does not provide much by way of an analysis and critique of gender, some appropriations of her work have attempted to draw feminist potential precisely from Arendt's disinterest in gender" (Feit 2011, 79). However, in contrast to these interpretations, Feit encourages focusing on sexuality, not gender, in Arendt. By doing this, he positions himself among scholars, such as Morris B. Kaplan, who "...have sought to think about Arendt as a resource for lesbian and gay politics" (ibid., 80). The analytical separation between gender and sexuality is curious, and I will return to it a little later on.

As I have discussed Didier Eribon's and Morris B. Kaplan's elaborations on Arendt in detail above (chapters III.3.1 – III.3.2), I do not intend to repeat their central ideas here. Instead, I want to focus on how Feit's interpretation of natality radicalizes both Eribon's and Kaplan's attempts to read Arendt as an ally for gay and lesbian politics.

Feit is critical of attempts that draw an unproblematic analogy between Jewishness and homosexuality, something that both Eribon and Kaplan do in their elaborations on Arendt. In my view, Feit's critique could also be extended to the unproblematic analogy that some feminist theorists draw between Jewishness and gender (see chapter III.2.3). The heart of this critique consists in Feit's worry that such analogies ignore the internal diversity and even conflicting interests within the gay and lesbian movement. Like Bonnie Honig (1993), Amy Allen (1999) and Linda Zerilli (2005), Feit too calls for attention to political action

that is not based on identity politics. An example of such political organizing is according to Feit the direct-action group ACT UP. According to him, the “die-ins” organized by ACT UP clearly demonstrated how the exclusion of certain groups of people (HIV-positive gay men in this case) from the public space of speech and action is equal to succumbing them to a form of living death (Feit 2011, 82). Not only are shame and marginalization impossible to deal with in isolation, but more importantly, exclusion from the public realm is dehumanizing. Hence, Feit contends that more important than focusing exclusively on the history of persecution is the attempt to articulate strategies through which access to public political spaces is reclaimed. At the same time, questions that were previously regarded as strictly private matters, such as sexuality and death from illness, are brought into the public arena (cf. Tambornino 2002, 25.). Like Edelman and Bersani, Feit also imports the concept of “death” (as well as imagery related to death) into political discourse as part of his reading strategy.

However, what clearly distinguishes Feit from thinkers such as Edelman and Bersani is his complete lack of interest in notions such as “queer negativity,” and distances himself from “[Michael] Warner and others, [who] seem satisfied that they have left behind the desire for vicarious immortality by rejecting sexual reproduction and its metaphors” (ibid. 78). Feit refers here to Warner’s critique of the institution of marriage as an institution that enforces normalization and remarginalizes, for instance, queer persons who do not want to engage in monogamous partnerships (Warner 1999, 88-89, 132; cf. Butler 2000, 136-81). According to Feit, queer critiques of heteronormativity should after all not be theoretically incompatible with the option of a positive account of marriage. This is where Feit is close to both Eribon and Kaplan, for whom a defense of marriage equality is part and parcel of queer political activism.

Feit’s critique of Warner is brief and mostly allusive, and does not take into account Warner’s development of Arendt’s idea of councils and public spaces. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner presents a reading of *The Human Condition*. Building on Arendt, Warner invents his own definition of the concept of “counterpublics” to signify spaces in which marginalized and persecuted groups of people enter the public scene. “Counterpublics are by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion” (Warner 2002, 62). Hence, a counterpublic, such as the performative and public disclosure of an ACT UP demonstration, is aware of the tension and even possible agony with dominant society. According to Warner, social movements that are built around the idea of radicalizing normative notions of gender and sexuality need counterpublics for public disclosure.

Although Warner does not take notice of Arendt's conception of the "conscious pariah" in his book, the parallel between the "counterpublics" and Arendt's appeal to theorize the urgent need for the political disclosure of marginalized groups is evident.

In distinction from Eribon, Kaplan and Warner, Feit is particularly interested in Arendt's concept of natality. Whereas Edelman cannot envision a future that is not based on the figural Child, Feit argues that a creation of such a future is indeed possible and desirable. He contends that precisely because Arendt does not theorize natality in relation to sexuality, gender or embodiment, or even a child, she does provide conceptual tools for a queer conception of political agency and citizenship: "Arendt goes out of her way to distance the symbolic character of the child – natality – from heterosexual reproduction..." (Feit 2012, 84). The original passage from *The Human Condition* that Feit is referring to in his discussion is a footnote in which Arendt clarifies her conception of love with reference to creation myths. Drawing from a myth in which an air god "inserts itself between earth and sky," and distinguishing this myth from fertility myths, Arendt contends: "[the] world-creating faculty of love is not the same as fertility, upon which most creation myths are based" (HC, 242 fn 82).

For Arendt, love is a particularly interesting context for the disclosure of the "who," because: love "[...] indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and of unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is concerned to the point of total unworldliness with what the loved person may be" (HC 242, emphasis in the original). Arendt hence argues that lovers are able to disclose their unique distinctness to each other, as well as to perceive each other's uniqueness and distinctness.

Feit comments:

Arendt insists that what is to be appreciated about love is not fertility – reproductive sexuality – but the insertion of a new being into the world. The creation myth Arendt refers to downplays the relevance of the heterosexual coitus. In this particular myth, the air god is simply "born *between* them" – not *to* the opposite-sex couple. [...] The passive voice erases both the specificity of the one who gives birth – the biological mother – as well as the act that causes the pregnancy itself. "A child has been born unto us." It is as if this child came from nowhere, materialized out of nothing. (Feit 2011, 87)

Now, the passage that I have quoted above can be interpreted as a perfect example of what Cavarero (1995) calls “the erasure of the Great Mother” or what Mary O’Brien (1981) calls a Platonic fantasy of male birth-giving (see chapters 1.1 and 3.1).

In a paper titled “‘A Child Has Been Born unto Us’: Arendt on Birth” (2014), Cavarero problematizes precisely the same passage in Arendt that Feit builds his reading on. Cavarero points out that the phrase is an incorrect reference to the Bible, both in terms of the exact wording of the phrase as well as the book to which it refers (Cavarero 2014, 12).<sup>57</sup> According to Cavarero, Arendt needs this miscitation in order to develop her highly abstract notion of natality. For Cavarero, not only is birth a curiously sexless event for Arendt, but also “the child,” without a maternal figure is in this context a strange creature: “[...] like Adam before a female companion had been placed beside him, Arendt’s infant evokes an inhuman solitude” (ibid. 23).

Whether Feit succeeds in his project or not, his intention is to connect the concept of natality to Arendt’s conception of political action as generative of new beginnings, as well as to her critique of the social. Contrary to Cavarero, Feit claims that Arendt’s critique of the social as a massive household (οἶκος), can be read as an attempt to undo the patriarchal family as the model of society and the nation state. In this sense, Feit’s project is a feminist project. For Feit, the conception of “community” in the Christian tradition is based on the image of a singular body, which again mirrors the homogenous family unity, established through biological kinship. Such a notion of family as a political basis of *patria*, contends Feit, threatens the Arendtian principles of “plurality” and the “uniqueness” and “distinctness” of each individual (Feit 2011, 90-92, HC §6, §9, §§24-25).

Feit argues that due to Arendt’s theorizing of the political realm as a space for displaying uniqueness and distinctness through speech and action, immortality is here connected to narration and memorialization (speech and action), and *not* to heterosexual reproduction. Hence, natality becomes a concept through which politics and sexual reproduction are separated without sacrificing the future to a mystic notion of “queer negativity.” By attempting to disentangle natality from both femininity as well as heterosexual reproduction, Feit thus attempts to clear ways for thinking about other forms of kinship, parenthood, family and citizenship than those that are structured around a normative conception of

<sup>57</sup> Cavarero comments on Arendt: “The citation is suggestive, but incorrect. In the Gospels, which do announce with true joy the birth of the child, the phrase as it is quoted here does not exist. It appears instead in Isaiah (9:6), translated into English both as “For to us a child is borne,” and, in the version of the King James Bible from which Arendt is plausibly drawing, as “For unto us a child is born.” The error, if indeed it is an error is thus twofold.” (Cavarero 2014, 12)

heterosexual reproduction.

Although Feit discusses neither Cavarero nor Kristeva, and although Cavarero does not refer to Feit, it is evident that from the perspective of Feit's interpretation, sexual difference readings leave unanswered the question of whether reversing the patriarchal tradition into a feminine symbolic order is subversive enough. To what extent does such a reversal change the logic of the discourse itself, which is based on binary oppositions? Furthermore, Cavarero's and Kristeva's treatment of motherhood in particular, can be claimed to collapse sexual and reproductive difference, leaving thus little or no space for theorizing non-biological motherhood. This again poses a number of problems for conceptualizing both queer parenthood as well as non-normative, heterosexual parenthood, such as single parenthood.

For Cavarero, the Arendtian infant who is not intelligible within the framework of heterosexual reproduction (because it is not marked as either male or female), "evokes an inhuman solitude" (Cavarero 2014, 23). For Feit on the other hand, precisely the abstract theorization of the Arendtian "child" opens up a space for imagining non-normative, queer notions of relationality, kinship, parenthood and childhood.

Yet, it remains unclear to what extent Feit's interpretation of the concept of natality succeeds in establishing Arendt as a "queer theorist" or a "critic of heteronormativity." As feminist scholars since the late 1970s have shown, Arendt indeed never associated "natality" with sexual difference and heterosexual reproduction, but is that a sufficient criterion for establishing that hence Arendt is a "queer theorist"? Feit's enthusiastic reading of Arendt is deliberately selective and bypasses passages in *The Human Condition* that would problematize his own interpretation. However, as I have argued throughout this study, deliberately selective readings of Arendt are a key feature of feminist and queer responses to Arendt's silence.

As with my discussion on Cavarero and Kristeva, rather than assessing the authors' readings, I have in this chapter wanted to highlight the contrast between opposing ways of utilizing Arendt's conception of natality for feminist and queer purposes. By deliberately contrasting Feit with Kristeva and Cavarero and comparing them to Edelman, I have sought to demonstrate the performative function that Arendtian concepts such as natality play in secondary literature. As I have argued throughout Part III, scholars interpreting and responding to Arendt's silence on gender navigate by singling out certain concepts or conceptual pairs and triplets for critical scrutiny. Hence, examining feminist and queer interpretations of Arendt's silence on gender

reveals the enormous creativity with which Arendtian concepts are deployed within secondary scholarship.

## **Conclusion: from Arendt's silence to feminist polyphony**

The main results of this study show that Arendt's enigmatic silence on gender has generated a rich and impressive feminist tradition of Arendt scholarship that deserves to be examined as a distinct field of inquiry. In this study I approach this tradition through a threefold analytic categorization that acknowledges the nuances, complexity and polyphony within the numerous feminist responses to Arendt's silence on gender over a period of four decades. The research design that I provide reveals that feminist interpretations of Arendt can be best understood as three distinct major responses that operate with specific and divergent Arendtian concepts. As I have argued throughout this study, the Anglophone, early second wave, sisterhood framework operates mainly through the "public/private" distinction and arrives at the conclusion that Arendt is an anti-feminist and a masculine thinker. Continental, femininity approaches highlight Arendt's notion of "natality," embracing Arendt as a feminine thinker and a female genius. Departing from both of these frameworks, postmodern and queer feminist interpretations elaborate on the "performativity of speech and action" as well as "the conscious pariah" in Arendt and view her as a rebellious precursor to postmodern critiques of identity politics and as a theorist of marginalized persecuted persons. I contend that taken together, these three feminist perspectives form a prism through which Arendt's enigmatic silence on gender receives different meanings, depending on the angle of interpretation and the concepts at play.

As previous theoretical literature on feminist interpretations of Arendt consists of only a few articles and one edited essay anthology from 1995, my study contributes to previous research by providing the first monograph-length inquiry into feminist Arendt receptions. Furthermore, this study fills a research gap in more general Arendt scholarship by accounting for the constantly evolving feminist and queer elaborations of Arendt.

My starting point locates the key texts in which Arendt is conceived as an anti-feminist (chapter 1). I propose that particularly when examined in the "sisterhood" framework of the 1970s and early 1980s feminist contexts, some of Arendt's key conceptual distinctions such as "public" vs. "private," "political" vs. "social" and "labor" vs. "action" generate interpretations of Arendt as an elitist masculine thinker, whose theoretical and ontological framework risks excluding women from the political realm altogether (e.g. Rich 1979; O'Brien 1981; Pitkin 1981; Brown 1988; Pitkin 1998). Hence, for the early second wave readers, the absence of gender in Arendt's oeuvre is not conceived as a matter concerning her personal lack of interest in the topic but, more seriously, a flaw in her overall philosophy.



I propose that "gender" is in these readings mostly understood as a stable identity category, with "women" and "men," "femininity" and "masculinity" operating as polar opposites.

In order to avoid making oversimplifying analogies between feminist authors writing within the same historical context, I tested my reading by placing the early second wave theorists in dialogue with later Anglophone theorizations. I deliberately chose Arendt's concept of the body as a point of reference for comparing and contrasting these readings. Through this paralleling I have arrived at the conclusion that a gradual shift begins to take place within feminist Arendt interpretations towards the beginning of the 1990s. Whereas the early second wave theorists were particularly interested in examining Arendt's lack of focus on the female body and women's embodied experiences, theorists influenced by postmodern theorizing, such as Honig (1988; 1993; 1995), Dietz (1995), Zerilli (1995) and Allen (1999), begin to look at Arendt through the sex/gender distinction. Instead of asking how Arendt theorizes women and female embodiment, the question is now whether Arendt regards the body and gender as natural, performative or both? Since my reading strategy successfully points out the texts in which Arendt is most clearly perceived as an anti-feminist, as well as the texts in which Arendt becomes conceived as a precursor to performative notions of embodiment and identity, my discussion strengthens my argument according to which Anglophone feminist interpretations can be categorized into two distinct responses, that is, those who perceive Arendt as an anti-feminist and those who perceive Arendt as a proto-feminist.

My analysis of feminist responses to Arendt's notion of the body is followed by an examination of how these feminist theorists respond to Arendt's critique of modernity. It is my contention that an examination of feminist responses to Arendt's conception of "modernity" provides a more thorough understanding of how and why Arendt becomes interpreted as a "reluctant modernist" and a precursor to postmodern theorizing in the first place. My detailed discussion and comparison of the readings of Benhabib (1996), Pitkin (1998) and Zerilli (2005) shows that the gradual influence of postmodern theorizing stimulates a discussion between feminist scholars regarding the use of Arendt to challenge, re-examine and reformulate new directions for feminist conceptions of the public sphere as well as feminist notions of freedom. Hence, I propose that in the 1990s Arendt becomes widely read as a useful theorist for conceptualizing differences within the numerous directions of feminist political theorizing. I demonstrate the internal tensions within feminist Arendt scholarship through my comparison of Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* (1998), which still, at the end of the 1990s characterizes Arendt as an anti-democrat

and an anti-feminist, with the readings of Seyla Benhabib (1996) and Linda Zerilli (2005), who both emphasize Arendt's potential for radical democratic, feminist projects.

As my focus in Part I is mainly on Anglophone debates, in Part II of this study I compare my research findings by switching geographical and linguistic contexts. Hence, I turn here to two of the most widely read French and Italian feminist elaborations of Arendt. In this context I also evaluate the claims of Honig (1995), Young-Bruehl (1996), Dietz (1995; 2002) and Maslin (2012), who all argue that there are two distinct historical phases in feminist Arendt receptions and that the tradition of feminist Arendt scholarship can be arranged according to the "woman question in Arendt" and the "Arendt question in feminism." As the scarce previous scholarship on feminist interpretations on Arendt does not take into account continental, feminist Arendt receptions, I devote Part II as a whole to Adriana Cavarero's and Julia Kristeva's responses to Arendt's silence on gender. I find that whereas in the Anglophone context "natality" is mentioned only in passing by early second wave theorists (Hartsock 1983; Ehlstain 1986) as well as in the interpretations influenced by postmodern theorizing, in the readings of Cavarero and Kristeva, "natality," "birth," "life" and "new beginnings" turn out to be the most important concepts for deciphering Arendt's complex philosophy and for understanding her silence on gender. In contrast to the Anglophone debates, Cavarero and Kristeva utilize Arendt for theorizing sexual difference, femininity and motherhood, and for articulating Arendt's writings as an expression of a specific form of feminine philosophy. My examination of Cavarero and Kristeva discloses that although internally differing, taken together these two, major continental feminist receptions of Arendt constitute a distinct way of responding to Arendt's silence on gender. Instead of viewing Arendt as a masculine Grecophile, Arendt emerges as a feminine genius.

Finally, in Part III, I examine in detail Anglophone postmodern feminist interpretations of Arendt's silence on gender. I argue that with the pioneering work of Bonnie Honig (1988; 1993; 1995), Arendt becomes widely read as a Nietzschean agonistic thinker, in contrast to Benhabib's (1993) reading of Arendt as a Habermasian proponent of consensus politics. I argue that postmodern feminist readings examine particularly Arendt's critique of Jewish identity politics as analogous to critiques of feminist identity politics. Extracting "speech and action" and "the conscious pariah" as operational concepts, theorists, such as Amy Allen (1999) and Margaret Betz Hull (2002), align Arendt with the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. These interpretations give further rise to conceptions of Arendt as a rebellious ally for queer accounts of marginalization, subjectivation and coerced social conformism (e.g. Kramer 1989; Kaplan 1997; Eribon 1999; Brenkman 2002; Mason 2002; Warner 2002; Feit 2011). In these readings, Arendt's silence on gender is interpreted as a

nascent critique of identity politics as well as an act which destabilizes normative notions of gender and sexuality.

By analyzing and contextualizing how each text in feminist secondary literature constitutes a distinct response to Arendt's silence on gender, and by then grouping these responses, this study finds that feminist efforts to make sense of the absence of a theory of gender in Arendt's political thinking can best be understood through a threefold categorization. Thus, my significant finding is that there are three distinct responses to the question of how Arendt's silence should be understood and what it means. The responses can be summarized as the following: a) Arendt was a rigorous female scholar, working in a male-dominated occupation, but she was an anti-feminist; b) Arendt was reluctant towards theorizing feminist politics, but her writing as a whole is an expression of femininity, and even of female genius; c) Arendt remained silent on gender as a political question, but her writings on Jewish resistance, for instance, contain parallels to feminist critiques of identity politics. Hence, Arendt can be theorized as a precursor to postmodern feminist and queer theorizing.

Taken together, these results partly support the earlier findings of Dietz, Honig, Young-Buehl and Maslin, according to whom a shift has occurred in feminist interpretations of Arendt during the beginning of the 1990s. Whereas early second wave interpreters of Arendt were interested in asking what, if anything, Arendt had to say about women and women's rights, theorists writing after the so-called postmodern turn have shifted their focus on asking what might feminist theorizing look like through an Arendtian conceptual framework. However, in contrast to previous attempts to arrange feminist responses to Arendt, the results of my dissertation indicate that this shift applies only to the Anglophone context from roughly the early 1970s to the late 1990s, and even in this context only partly so.

Although the strongest critics of Arendt are indeed theorists writing in the context of Anglophone early second wave feminist theorizing, some of the central ideas and concepts of these critical framings (such as the view of Arendt as a strong proponent of a crude and sexist public/private distinction) are also circulated and reiterated in much later works, such as in Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* from 1998 and in the conversation between Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from 2007. Hence, Arendt's alleged anti-feminism is a recurring theme throughout several decades of feminist scholarship. At the same time, I argue that on the other hand some of the key ideas of postmodern feminist

readings, such as Amy Allen's intriguing analogy between Jewish identity politics and feminist identity politics (1999), appear already in marginal feminist Arendt interpretations from the 1980s (e.g. Laine 1983; Markus 1988). Furthermore, the fact that continental, French and Italian feminist receptions have been ignored in the historical framings of Dietz, Honig, Young-Bruehl and Maslin, gives the misleading picture that the discussion of Arendt's relevance for feminist theorizing is exclusive to the American academic context. Honig (1988; 1993), for instance, praises French male post-structuralist theorists, such as Lyotard, but does not elaborate on French post-structuralist *feminist* theory at all.

Finally, a significant research result of this study is that *The Human Condition*, which is the most important text for feminist interpretations of Arendt, contains two different chapters which have influenced and generated polarized ways of appropriating Arendt. These are chapter II: "The Public and the Private Realm" and chapter V: "Action." This significant aspect is missing from previous research on feminist responses to Arendt.

The three feminist responses that I have identified in this dissertation do not relate strictly to a chronological, historical or even a thematic order. Instead, versions of each response can be found throughout four decades of feminist secondary literature, and contrasting interpretative shifts appear parallel to each other. Taken together, these findings clearly suggest that feminist theorists respond to Arendt's silence on gender with rich polyphony. Precisely because Arendt did not theorize gender as a political question, and did not reflect on the women's movements of her time, her theoretical conceptions and reflections on other topics, such as "action," "power," "violence," "natality," "unique distinctness," "plurality," "spontaneity," "revolution," "pariahdom" and "freedom," have been extensively explored by feminist theorists. Arendt's silence on gender implies that her account on questions such as gender and sexuality must be constructed by drawing from her philosophy at large. Very often, feminist theorists focus on a particular concept, theme or distinction in Arendt's thinking and argue for the importance of precisely this angle of entering Arendt's works. The polyphony appears when theorists engage in critical debates and dialogue by rejecting or elaborating on each other's interpretations. This is an aspect that I have highlighted throughout this study. It indicates that on one hand Arendt's account on gender and sexuality can only be grasped through multiple perspectives and, on the other hand, this same holds for feminist interpretations themselves. There is no single, univocal feminist theory or *feminism* that can be applied to Arendt's texts in order to answer the question of how and why she left questions related to gender and sexuality largely untheorized. Instead,

there are several feminisms, and many feminist voices, which relate to each other in differing ways.

A striking aspect of feminist elaborations of Arendt in comparison to the general Arendt reception is the central status of *The Human Condition* in feminist debates. As I have argued, Seyla Benhabib points out this "standard reading" of Arendt already in 1996. Since very few feminist scholars apart from Ruth A. Miller, Kathrin Braun and Simona Forti have examined the biopolitical dimension in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the potential relevance of this work for current debates on gender and sexuality within feminist and queer theorizing remains unexamined. In my discussion on gay and queer readings of Arendt (chapter 6), I have pointed the direction towards possible ways of theorizing gender, sexuality and race from the perspective of an Arendtian critique of biopolitics. As biopolitics administers, manages and protects certain forms of life as livable and normal, while letting other 'non-normal' and 'non-normative' forms of life die, I see particularly Morris B. Kaplan's interpretation of Arendt's theorization of Jewishness and homosexuality as pathological races as a fruitful path towards reading Arendt as a precursor to biopolitics. Feminist and queer theorizing could also examine "natality," "spontaneity" and "acting in concert" as Arendt's response and resistance to biopolitics. In this way, Julia Kristeva and Arendt might be creatively queered and read conjointly.

A further question that I want to point out is the meaning of Arendt's failure to conform to the normative expectations of being a woman and being a Jewish woman in her time. Jennifer Ring, most notably, stresses Arendt's Jewishness and gender as important triggers for male sexist dismissals of her work. On the other hand, I argue in this study that this failure is significantly reflected also in feminist secondary literature both on an argumentative level as well as in biographical characterizations of Arendt. The persistent and reappearing figure and even joke of Arendt as a masculine Grecophile is a concrete example of how feminist theorists have responded to Arendt's gender ambiguity on the textual level and in her personal life.

In my view, Arendt's readings of Rahel Varnhagen and Marcel Proust show that failure to fit into expectations and norms has always been an admired, hated and exoticized aspect of the figure of the rebel – or the conscious *pariah*, to use Arendt's own terminology. Hence, it is not surprising that precisely queer interpretations of Arendt have embraced her ambiguity and ambivalence. What I find notable, on the other hand, is the absence of a systematic examination of gay and queer studies voices within the rich history of

feminist interpretations of Arendt. Since I interpret these voices as being part of the feminist tradition, I have here opened a path towards theorizing the meaning of Arendt's silence on gender from a perspective that problematizes conventional and normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Finally, I claim that although Arendt herself failed to envision the importance of gender and sexuality as political questions, in some cases, such as in the case of Arendt's written work, silence and failure can in fact be theorized as success, even though this success is partly unintended and partly accidental. I suggest that the success of Arendt's silence is the space that her philosophy has provided for the growth of an impressive, rich and complex tradition of feminist and queer voices.



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- OT *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951. Third edition with new prefaces, 1973.
- HC *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Second edition with an introduction by Margaret Canovan, 1998.
- EJ *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press, 1963. Revised and enlarged edition, 1965.
- OR *On Revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 1963. Revised second edition, 1965.
- BPF *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press, 1961. Revised edition, 1968.
- MDT *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.
- OV *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.
- CR *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.
- JP *The Jew as Pariah*. Ron H. Feldman (ed.) New York: Grove Press, 1978.
- JW *The Jewish Writings*. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds.). New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
- LM *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. LM I: Volume One, Thinking. LM II: Volume Two, Willing.
- LKPP *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ronald Beiner (ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- EU *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*. Jerome Kohn (ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.
- RJ *Responsibility and Judgment*. Jerome Kohn (ed.) New York: Schocken Books, 2003.

- PP *The Promise of Politics*. Jerome Kohn (ed.) New York: Schocken Books, 2005.
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