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THE PARIAH AND HER SHADOW

Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen

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A METHODOLOGICAL PREAMBLE

Hannah Arendt's self-consciousness of herself as a Jew and her belief that in the twentieth century to be Jewish had become a "political" and unavoidable fact stand in sharp contrast to her almost total silence on the woman's question.¹ While the fate of the Jewish people is at the center of her public-political thought, her identity as a woman and the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of being female in the modern world do not find explicit recognition in her work. We know from her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruhl that Arendt "was suspicious of women 'who gave orders,' skeptical about whether women should be political leaders, and steadfastly opposed to the social dimensions of Women's Liberation."²

This perplexing constellation becomes clearer, if also more troubling, when one reads the opening sections of *The Human Condition*. Through these pages one can easily gain the impression that Arendt not only ignored the woman's question but that she was almost a reactionary on the issue in that she accepted the age-old confinement of women to the private realm of the household and their exclusion from the public sphere.³ This was certainly the conclusion drawn by Adrienne Rich in her caustic and powerful comments on *The Human Condition*:

In thinking about the issues of women and work I turned to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* to see how a major political philosopher of our time, a woman greatly

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respected in the intellectual establishment, had spoken to the theme. I found her essay illuminating, not so much for what it says, but for what it is. 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 does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing. 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 ideologies. In fact, the loss is ours, because Arendt's desire to grasp deep moral issues is the kind of concern we need to build a common world which will amount to more than "life-styles."⁴

Adrienne Rich's verdict on Hannah Arendt is based on certain heuristic assumptions that lead her to the conclusion that one should read Arendt's work "not so much for what it says but for what it is." Reading Hannah Arendt's work though from the standpoint of a question that she herself did not place at the center of her thought, namely the woman's question, and examining her political philosophy in this light require certain innovative hermeneutical and interpretive principles that go beyond those traditionally deployed and shared by Rich as well. One very commonly shared principle in the interpretation of texts can be characterized as *historicist indifference*. Historicist indifference requires that we understand a text, a theory, a thinker's views in the context of their genesis. This obvious and unproblematic beginning point of any interpretive effort is inadequate when it is accompanied by the further assumption that to understand can only mean to understand in context and that to pose contemporary questions to historical texts is to fall into anachronism.

The second commonly shared postulate of interpretation, and the one most prominently displayed by Adrienne Rich, can be named the *self-righteous dogmatism of the latecomers*. In posing questions to the past, this attitude assumes that our already attained answers are the right ones. This kind of reading of past texts is particularly prevalent among activists of social movements who, very often, simply juxtapose the misunderstandings of the past to the truths of the present. For the art of reading and appropriating the past such an attitude is inadequate. If we approach tradition and thinkers of the past only to "debunk" them, then there really is no point in seeking to understand them at all. Such dogmatism kills the spirit and dries up the soul, and it is certainly not conducive to the task of "building a common world," in Adrienne Rich's words, "which will amount to more than mere 'life-styles.'"⁵

In approaching Hannah Arendt's thought from where we stand today and in probing it from the standpoint of her identity as a German-Jewish woman neither principle is adequate: historicist indifference is inadequate since it kills the interests of contemporary readers in past texts by blocking the asking

of any questions that transcend the immediate historical context in which these texts were written. The self-righteousness of the latecomers is also misleading in that it would lead us to assume that we can no longer learn from Arendt, that her work has ceased to engage us, that we can treat her as a sociological and psychological curiosity exemplifying the "male-identified female mind." Applied to Hannah Arendt's work, this would mean that all questioning of her work, particularly on the woman's issue, would be considered anachronistic and insensitive to her own historical concerns. Yet as I hope to show in the rest of this essay, such questioning is neither anachronistic nor insensitive to Arendt's own concerns, but to the contrary, can allow us to pursue certain lines of interpretation that shed unusual light on the initial concerns that motivated Arendt's work. In view of the enormity of Arendt's contribution to political thought in this century, I also resist the conclusion that we should only treat her as a sociological curiosity.

How then should we proceed? Asking the woman's question, as always, signifies a movement from center to margin in the hermeneutical task.⁶ We begin by searching in the footnotes, in the marginalia, in the less recognized works of a thinker for those "traces" (*Spurren*) that are left behind by women's presence and more often than not by their absence. For Hannah Arendt's work, this method means that 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."

RAHEL LEVIN VARNHAGEN'S QUEST FOR THE "WORLD"

Hannah Arendt's intellectual biography of Rahel Varnhagen, born as Rahel Levin in Berlin in 1771, was begun in 1929, shortly after she completed her dissertation on Augustine's concept of love under Karl Jaspers's directorship in Heidelberg. This study appears to have been intended as her *Habilitations-schrift*, which was to win her the right to teach in a German University.⁷ It was completed in 1933 except for the last two chapters, which were finished subsequently during her exile in France in 1938. The book appeared almost twenty years later in 1957 in English translation; the first German edition came out in 1959.⁸ *Rahel Varnhagen*, which Arendt subtitled in German "Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Juedin aus der Romantik," "the life history of a German Jewess from the Romantic period," is a difficult text. An early reviewer found that it

is a relentlessly abstract book—slow, cluttered, static, curiously oppressive; reading it feels like sitting in a hothouse with no watch. One is made to feel the subject, the waiting distraught woman; one is made aware, almost physically, of her intense femininity, her frustration. (Sybille Bedford)⁹

“The relentless abstractness” of the book is in part due to Arendt’s methodological angle, which she herself admits is “unusual.” “It was never my intention,” explains Arendt,

to write a book *about* Rahel; about her personality, which might lend itself to various interpretations according to the psychological standards and categories that the author introduces from outside; nor about her position in Romanticism and the effect of the Goethe cult in Berlin, of which she was actually the originator; nor about the significance of her salon for the social history of the period; nor about her ideas and her “Weltanschauung,” insofar as these can be reconstructed from her letters. *What interested me solely was to narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she herself might have told it.* My portrait therefore follows as closely as possible Rahel’s own reflections upon herself, although it is naturally couched in different language and does not consist solely of variations upon quotations. (xv-xvi, emphasis added)

This claim to “narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she herself *might have told it*” is astonishing. Arendt’s confidence in her judgments about Rahel Varnhagen is so deep that she does not fear correcting Rahel’s husband’s presentation of her. In fact, at one level the book reclaims Rahel’s life and memory from the clutches of her husband—the generous and giving, but upright and boring Prussian civil servant Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, who, Arendt maintains, presented Rahel’s life such as to make her “associations and circle of friends appear less Jewish and more aristocratic, and to show Rahel herself in a more conventional light, one more in keeping with the taste of the times” (xv). One might wish to ask what gives Arendt this confidence that she, in fact, could know or could claim to know this woman better than her husband? How can she, Arendt, separated from Rahel’s death in March 7, 1833 by almost one hundred years at the time of composing her book on Rahel, claim to narrate Rahel’s story as she herself “might have told it?” What hermeneutical mysteries does this little subjunctive phrase, “might have told it,” contain?

The facts of Rahel Varnhagen’s life story are well known: Rahel was born in Berlin on May 19, 1771 as the eldest child of the well-to-do merchant Markus Levin. She had three younger brothers and a younger sister. Her parental household was still Orthodox Jewish and uneducated in German culture. Rahel’s early letters are written in Yiddish, that is, with Hebrew characters.¹⁰ After the death of her father in 1790, her brother Marcus assumes the family business and provides Rahel and her mother with a regular income.

Between 1790 and 1806, Rahel's salon in the attic room on Jaegerstrasse, runs. Among the guests are the Humboldt brothers (Alexander and Wilhelm), Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Gentz, Schleiermacher, Prince Louis Ferdinand of Prussia and his mistress, Pauline Wiesel, the classical philologist Friedrich August Wolf, Jean Paul, Brentano, the Tieck brothers. From 1790 to 1804, Rahel has a series of friendships and love affairs with aristocrats of various European origins, ranging from the Swedish Ambassador Karl Gustav von Brinckmann to Count Karl von Finckenstein, and to Friedrich von Gentz (a career diplomat who was to play a significant role in the Vienna Congress of 1815).¹¹

With the entry of Napoleon into Berlin on October 27, 1806 Rahel's salon and circle of friends are scattered. A wave of nationalism and anti-Semitism begins to sweep the intellectual and aristocratic circles that had formerly befriended Varnhagen. This period heralds the end of one of the first cycles of "German-Jewish symbiosis." In this period, family and financial difficulties follow suit in Rahel's life. Her mother moves out of the home on Jaegerstrasse and dies shortly thereafter in 1809. Rahel, who had met Karl August von Varnhagen in 1808, now moves from Berlin to Teplitz. After several short separations, she is baptized on September 27, 1814 and marries Varnhagen. Von Varnhagen, who is a career civil servant, is moved around several cities like Frankfurt and Karlsruhe. In 1819 they resettle in Berlin and from 1821 to 1832, the Berlin salon of the Varnhagens starts. Among the guests are Bettina von Arnim, Heinrich Heine, Prince Pueckler-Muskau, G.W.F. Hegel, Ranke, and Eduard Gans. Rahel dies on March 7, 1833.

Arendt's reconstruction of Rahel's story is based primarily on the unprinted letters and diaries from the Varnhagen collection of the Manuscript Division of the Prussian State Library. In her 1956 preface she indicates that these manuscripts were stored in the eastern provinces of Germany during the war and "what happened to it remains a mystery, so far as I know."¹² We know now that the entire collection has turned up at the library in Krakow, Poland.¹³ Arendt herself had to rest content with quoting from old excerpts, photostats, and copies of documents.

There are manifold layers of reading and interpretation that must be disentangled from one another in approaching Arendt's attempt to tell Rahel's story as she herself "might have told it." In the early 1930s Arendt's own understanding of Judaism in general and her relationship to her own Jewish identity were undergoing profound transformations. These transformations were taking her increasingly away from the egalitarian, humanistic Enlightenment ideals of Kant, Lessing, and Goethe toward a recognition of the ineliminable and unassimilable fact of Jewish difference within German culture. In telling Rahel Varnhagen's story Arendt was engaging in a process of collective self-understanding and redefinition as a German Jew.¹⁴ Her

correspondence with Karl Jaspers, who follows the development of Arendt's work on this book with amazement bordering on irritation and bewilderment, is quite revealing in this respect.

On March 30, 1930 Karl Jaspers writes to Hannah Arendt concerning a lecture of hers on Rahel Varnhagen. Unfortunately, this lecture is no longer available. The exchange of letters between Jaspers and Arendt gives the distinct impression that Arendt here is breaking new ground and taking the *Existenzphilosophie* of her teacher Jaspers in new directions. Jaspers indicates that he wants to "get a clearer idea in the give and take of our conversation of what you mean."¹⁵ He continues,

You objectify "Jewish Existence" existentially—and in doing so perhaps cut existential thinking off at the roots. The concept of being-thrown-back-on-oneself can no longer be taken altogether seriously since it is *grounded* in terms of the fate of the Jews instead of being rooted in itself. The passage from the letters, which you have chosen so well, suggests something quite different to me: "Jewishness" is a *façon de parler* or a manifestation of a selfhood originally negative in its outlook and not comprehensible from the historical situation. It is a fate that did not experience liberation from the enchanted castle.¹⁶ (emphasis in the text)

Jaspers is clearly puzzled by the status of the category of "Jewish existence," and by whether or not Arendt is attributing a more fundamental status to this fact than is allowable by the categories of existential philosophy. Jaspers himself sees "Jewish existence" as a wholly contingent or accidental matter—or as he puts it—"a *façon de parler*," a manner of speaking, or "the manifestation of a selfhood originally negative in its outlook." Neither individually nor collectively, however, can he see in the matter of "being Jewish" more than a contingency of culture and history or an accident of birth.

Arendt's answer is cautious: she indicates that she has not tried

to "ground" Rahel's existence in terms of Jewishness—or at least I was not conscious of doing so. This lecture is only a *preliminary* work meant to show that on the foundation of being Jewish a certain possibility of existence *can* arise that I have tentatively and for the time being called fatefulness. This fatefulness arises from the very fact of "foundationlessness" and can occur *only* in a separation from Judaism.¹⁷ (emphasis in the text)

Given the perspective of hindsight and what it would signify to be Jewish in Germany by the end of the 1930s, this exchange is almost astonishing in its abstractness and aloofness. Neither Jaspers nor Arendt could have anticipated a situation when the fact of being Jewish would indeed be the fate for millions and millions. Yet it is interesting that Arendt is full of premonition, that she seems to be sensing a certain "uncanniness" (*das unheimliche*) in Rahel's own attempt to live life as her "fate." With reference to Rahel, Arendt

writes, "What this all really adds up to—fate, being exposed, what life means—I can't really say in the abstract (and I realize that in trying to write about it here.) Perhaps all I can try to do is illustrate it with examples."¹⁸ Eventually, Arendt comes to describe Rahel's own attitude toward her Judaism as a move away from the psychology of the *parvenu* to that of the *pariah*. Whereas the *parvenu* denies "fatefulness" by becoming like the others of the dominant culture, by erasing difference and assimilating to dominant trends, the *pariah* is the outsider and the outcast who either cannot or chooses not to erase the fate of difference. The self-conscious *pariah* transforms difference from being a source of weakness and marginality into one of strength and defiance. This is ultimately what Arendt admires in Rahel: commenting on Rahel's reflections on her life as "Frederike Varnhagen," the respectable wife of a Prussian civil servant she writes,

She had at last rid herself of Rahel Levin, but she did not want to become Frederike Varnhagen, nee Robert. The former was not socially acceptable; the latter could not summon the resolution to make a fraudulent self-identification. For "all my life I considered myself Rahel and nothing else."¹⁹

Rahel's Jewish identity and Arendt's own changing understanding of what this means in the 1930s in Germany are the central hermeneutical motifs in the Varnhagen story.²⁰ In telling Rahel's story, Hannah Arendt was bearing testimony to a political and spiritual transformation that she herself was undergoing. There is thus a mirror effect in the narrative. The one narrated about becomes the mirror in which the narrator also portrays herself.

There is an additional dimension to this narration, and it is one that leads more directly to future themes in Arendt's political philosophy. In telling Rahel's story, Arendt is concerned to document a certain form of romantic *Innerlichkeit*, "inwardness." To live life "as if it were a work of art," writes Arendt, "to believe that by 'cultivation' (*Bildung*) one can make a work of art of one's life was the great error that Rahel shared with her contemporaries" (xvi). The "claustrophobic" feeling about the book that was noted above, the sensation namely that "one is in a hothouse without a watch" (Sybille Bedford), derives from Arendt's literary success in conveying this sense of endless expectation, of an endless yearning without fulfillment, of inaction coupled with the wish to live and experience most intensely—"What am I doing?" asks Rahel. "Nothing. I am letting life run upon me" (quoted in xvi). It is this "worldless" sensibility that Arendt finds most objectionable about Rahel. In the opening chapters of the Varnhagen biography that deal with romantic introspection Arendt indicates what she sees as the greatest weakness and ultimately as the "apolitical" quality of romantic inwardness.

Introspection accomplishes two feats: it annihilates the actual existing situation by dissolving it in mood, and at the same time it lends everything subjective an aura of objectivity, publicity, extreme interest. In mood, the boundaries between what is intimate and what is public become blurred; intimacies are made public, and public matters can be experienced and expressed only in the realm of the intimate—ultimately, in gossip.²¹

Romantic introspection leads one to lose a sense of reality by losing the boundaries between the public and the private, the intimate and the shared. Romantic introspection compounds the “worldlessness” from which Rahel Varnhagen suffers to the very end. The category of the “world” is the missing link between the “worldless” reality of Rahel Levin Varnhagen and her contemporaries and Hannah Arendt’s own search for a recovery of the “public world” through authentic political action in her political philosophy. Romantic inwardness displays qualities of mind and feeling that are the exact opposite of those required of political actors and which Arendt highly valued. Whereas romantic introspection blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political, the political qualities of distinguishing sharply and precisely between the public good and the personal sphere are extremely important for Arendt. Whereas the ability to judge the world as it appears to others and from many different points of view is the quintessential epistemic virtue in politics, romantic inwardness tends to eliminate the distinction between one’s own perspective and those of others through mood. Finally, an interest in the world and a commitment to sustain it is fundamental for politics, whereas romantic inwardness cultivates the soul rather than sustaining the world.

Varnhagen’s search for a place in the “world” was defined not only by her identity as a Jew and as a romantic but also as a woman. Although Arendt does not place this theme at the center, her story of Rahel begins to reveal an unthematized gender subtext. In Arendt’s account, Varnhagen attempts to regain a place in the world for herself by using typically female strategies. In the concluding paragraphs of her 1956 preface to *Rahel Varnhagen* Arendt remarks,

The modern reader will scarcely fail to observe that Rahel was neither beautiful nor attractive; that all the men with whom she had any kind of love relationship were younger than she herself; that she possessed no talents with which to employ her extraordinary intelligence and passionate originality; and finally, that she was a typically “romantic” personality, and that the Woman problem, that is the discrepancy between what men expected of women “in general” and what women could give or wanted in their turn, was already established by the conditions of the era and represented a gap that virtually could not be closed. (xviii)

Rahel’s strategies for dealing with the fate of her Jewishness were stereotypically female ones: assimilation and recognition through love affairs,

courtships, and eventually marriage with Gentile males. The female strategy of assimilation through marriage is of course made possible by a gender asymmetrical world in which it is the husband's public status that defines the woman, rather than the other way around. Rahel Levin Varnhagen's life was full of stories of failed love affairs, broken promises, and unsuccessful engagements. By giving herself to the right man, Rahel hoped to attain the "world" that was denied her as a Jew and as a female.

But "where" is the world, and "who" is it composed of? Interestingly, Arendt's most explicit definition of this category comes much later, in a 1960 essay on Lessing that focuses on *Nathan der Weise*. "But the world and the people who inhabit it," writes Arendt,

are not the same. The world lies between people, and this in-between is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe. Even where the world is still halfway in order, or is kept halfway in order, the public realm has lost the power of illumination that was originally part of its very nature. (The) withdrawal from the world need not harm an individual; but with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men.²²

Arendt gave this speech in 1959, on receiving the Lessing Peace Prize of the city of Hamburg. Her almost melancholy reflections on the loss of the "world" as that fragile "space of appearances" that "holds men together" stand in interesting contrast with the theme of "worldlessness" that dominates the *Varnhagen* book. Rahel and her contemporaries failed to create a world, except in that brief intermezzo between 1790 and 1806 when a few exceptional Prussian Jews could emerge into the world of genteel society, only to be pushed back into obscurity with the onslaught of anti-Semitism in Prussia after the victory of Napoleon. The fragility and almost illusory character of the world of the "salons" that Jewesses like Rahel Varnhagen and Henriette Herz created for a brief moment stands in sharp contrast to the fate of the "stateless" and "worldless" people that the Jews would become in the twentieth century.

The "recovery of the public world" of politics under conditions of modernity is a guiding theme of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy at large. The personal story of Rahel Varnhagen, of her circle of friends, the failure of her salon, the political naïveté of her generation of Jews are like a *negative utopia* of Arendt's concept of political community in her subsequent works. Nonetheless, this cluttered and at times awkward youthful text retains themes, issues, and preoccupations that are much closer to the nerve of Arendt's existential concerns than some of her subsequent formulations.

Arendt's own relentless pessimism about the significance of the salons certainly cannot be separated from the tragic ending of the utopian and optimistic hopes they had initially kindled in the souls of many German Jews. As she notes in the preface to *Rahel Varnhagen*:

The present biography was written with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism (although, naturally without any premonition of how far the physical annihilation of the Jewish people in Europe would be carried); but at that time, shortly before Hitler's coming to power, I did not have the perspective from which to view the phenomenon as a whole. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that the subject matter is altogether historical, and that nowadays not only the history of the German Jews, but also their specific complex of problems, are a matter of the past. (xvii)

Written in 1956, these melancholy reflections distance Hannah Arendt herself from this biography by "historicizing" Rahel and the fate of the German Jews to whom she belonged. Yet for us, as Arendt's readers, the questions posed by her biography of Rahel Varnhagen cannot be restricted to this tragic-historical context alone. For early works are also beginnings and beginnings frequently are closer to the nerve of a thinker's oeuvre, precisely because time, experience, sophistication, and the apparatus of scholarship have not cluttered over the existential questions and preoccupations that are at the origins of thought. When read in the light of this hermeneutical principle, Arendt's early treatment of Rahel Varnhagen suggests a set of issues that go well beyond the fate of German-Jewish Jewry and of the salonnières among them and that point us to the heart of her political theory. I will assemble these issues under a question mark: "An Alternative Genealogy of Modernity?"

I want to suggest that at the beginnings of Arendt's work, we discover a different genealogy of modernity than the one so characteristic of her later writings. As distinct from the analysis of *The Human Condition*, the "rise of the social" in this alternative genealogy of modernity would not refer to the rise of commodity exchange relations in a burgeoning capitalist economy, but would designate the emergence of new forms of sociability, association, intimacy, friendship, speaking and writing habits, tastes in food, manners and arts, as well as hobbies, pastimes, and leisure activities. Furthermore, in the midst of this alternative genealogy of the social is a curious space that is of the home yet public, that is dominated by women yet visited and frequented by men, that is highly mannered yet egalitarian, and that is hierarchical toward the "outsiders" and egalitarian toward its members. What leads Arendt to lose sight of this "other modernity" with which she began and to replace it with a relentless pessimism? Of course, at one level the answer to this question is the Holocaust and the fate of European Jewry that nullified

all the ideals of the Enlightenment and modernity in which Rahel's generation still believed. At another level though the answer may be that perhaps Arendt never did lose sight of this other modernity and that her purported "Graeco-centrism" is as much a fiction created by us her readers as it is based on her own texts. Let us reread the meaning of the concept of the "social" in Arendt's work in the light of what I am suggesting is an alternative genealogy of modernity.

*THE RISE OF THE SOCIAL. AN ALTERNATIVE
GENEALOGY OF MODERNITY IN ARENDT'S WORK?*

Consider the standard reading of Arendt's political philosophy. For many, Arendt is a nostalgic and antimodernist thinker, who sees in modernity the decline of the public sphere of politics and the emergence of an amorphous, anonymous, uniformizing reality that she calls "the social." In this account, the social, by which is meant a form of glorified, national housekeeping in economic and pecuniary matters, displaces the concern with the political, with the *res publica*, from the hearts and minds of men. The social is the perfect medium in which bureaucracy, the "rule by nobody," emerges and unfolds.

As an account of modernity, this view is jarring in so many ways that it requires a great deal of hermeneutical uncharity to attribute it to a thinker who was as historically grounded and sophisticated as Hannah Arendt was. There are actually three meanings of the term *social* in Arendt's work. At one level, the "social" refers to the growth of a capitalist commodity exchange economy.²³ In the second place, the social refers to aspects of "mass society."²⁴ In the third and least investigated sense, the social refers to "sociability," to the quality of life in civil society and civic associations.

To begin to explore the last and least discussed meaning of the term in Arendt's work, namely the social as sociability and as the quality of civic-associational life, consider now the following passage.

But society equalizes under all circumstances, and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and *that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual.* (HC, 41, emphasis added)

By "equality" in this passage, Arendt does not mean political and legal equality, but rather the equalization of tastes, behavior, manners and lifestyles, which is executed by mass society. Under such conditions "distinction

and difference have become private matters of the individual.” But have they really? Arendt’s historical and political writings on the Jewish question, beginning with her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, reveal quite a different picture. They show that the constant struggle and tension between equality and difference, both in the social and the political domains, is characteristic of modernity. In one of her most illuminating remarks on this dialectic of equality and difference Arendt notes,

Equality of condition, though it is certainly a basic requirement for justice, is nevertheless among the greatest and most uncertain ventures of modern mankind. The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people; and thus all the more unequal do individuals and groups become. Whenever equality becomes a mundane fact in itself, without any gauge by which it may be measured or explained, then there is one chance in a hundred that it will be recognized simply as a working principle of a political organization *in which otherwise unequal people have equal rights*; there are ninety-nine chances that it will be mistaken for an innate quality of every individual, who is “normal” if he is like everybody else and “abnormal” if he happens to be different. *This perversion of equality from a political into a social concept is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.* (OT, 54, emphasis added)

Arendt’s work as a historian of anti-Semitism brilliantly documents this dialectic of equality and difference, as well as showing how much more complicated and multilayered the dynamics of the social are. Note that the social in this context means *sociability*; patterns of human interaction; modalities of taste in dress, eating, leisure, and lifestyles generally; differences in aesthetic, religious, and civic manners and outlooks; patterns of socializing, and forming marriages, friendships, acquaintanceships, and commercial exchanges. Undoubtedly, Arendt’s attitude toward even this aspect of the social is somewhat ambivalent. It is within this sphere that the homogenization of tastes, attitudes, manners, and lifestyles begins to spread in modernity; this is the sphere in which the parvenu dominates. By contrast, the pariah does not fare well in “society.” The pariah is an outsider in matters of taste, manners, habits, and friendships. She breaks social conventions and flouts social norms; she goes against established traditions and plays with social expectations. The self-conscious pariah insists on the fact of difference and distinction but does so in a manner that is not wholly individualist. The complete pariah would be the total outsider, the marginal bordering on suicide, insanity, or criminality. The self-conscious pariah is one who lives with difference and distinctness in such a way as to establish her difference in the “eyes” of society. The self-conscious pariah requires visibility, requires to be seen “as other” and as “different,” even if only by a very small group,

by a community of like-minded friends. Paradoxically then, the self-conscious pariah must both reject and affirm the sphere of the social.

This is precisely what Rahel Varnhagen's salon was: a space of sociability in which the individual desire for difference and distinctness could assume an intersubjective reality and in which unusual individuals, and primarily, certain highly talented Jewish women, could find a "space" of visibility and self-expression. The Jewish salonnières of Berlin were the daughters and wives of well-to-do Jewish merchants and intellectuals who ran large and complex households and whose fathers and husbands were frequently absent from the house in the world of commerce and community affairs. These women accomplished a triple feat through their social activities: first, they emancipated themselves from traditional patriarchal families. Often they refused to marry their designated Jewish future spouses to be; some converted to Christianity and lost all ties to the religion of their forebears. Their emancipation as "women" was often coupled with their rejection of traditional Judaism. Second, they helped create high culture in a crucial era at the end of the Enlightenment and the outbreak of romanticism. They did so by creating a "social space" in which Berlin's intelligentsia, writers, artists, as well as civil servants and aristocrats could gather together; exchange ideas, views, and texts; mix and mingle with each other; be seen, heard, and noticed by others. In this respect, they acted as the patrons of the intelligentsia in a city that at the time lacked a university, a parliament, and a generous court. Finally, the salons forged bonds across classes, religious groups, and the two sexes, creating the four walls within which new forms of *sociability and intimacy* could develop among members of an emergent civil society.²⁵

What then are the forms of sociability appropriate to the salons? Here a distinction needs to be made between the French and the German versions of this occurrence. In the French salons, which developed in the shadow cast by the courtly regime of the *le Roi Soleil*, more stylized, ceremonial, and hierarchically defined manners are the norm. In the German salons, developing against the background of a weak aristocracy and a nonexistent courtly public sphere, more spontaneous, less stylized and ceremonial manners dominate. In both cases, the salons bring to life the Enlightenment idea of *l'homme, der Mensch*, the human being as such. This is the vision that underneath it all, when divested of all our social, cultural, religious accoutrements, ranks and distinction, we are all humans like each other. There is no greater proof of our common humanity besides the fact that we can communicate with and understand each other. The salons are social gatherings in which the "joy of conversation," the joy of communication, and understanding as well as misunderstandings and lack of communication are discovered. This is indeed Rahel Varnhagen's strength to which her admirers

testify: the magic of her language, her capacity to express herself, her witticisms, her judgments. Rahel opens a world for those with whom she is communicating through her speech. The joy of speech culminates in friendship, in that meeting of hearts, minds, and tastes between two individuals. Particularly in the case of the German salons, the search for a "Seelensfreund," a friend of one's soul, one who understands oneself perhaps better than oneself, is predominant. With friends one shares one's soul; to share the soul though—an entity that itself comes to be discovered in this new process of individuation—one has to project a certain depth of the self, one has to view the self as a being whose public presence does not reveal all. The public reveals and conceals at the same time; it is only in the withdrawal from the public into the sheltered space of a twosome or threesome relationship that one can also move inward, toward who one really is. In this respect as well, the salon is a fascinating space: unlike an assembly hall, a town square, a conference room, or even simply the family dinner table, the salon, with its large, luxurious, and rambling space, allows for moments of intimacy; in a salon one is with each other but must not always be next to each other. Salons are amorphous structures with no established rules of entry and exit for those who have formed intimacy; in fact, it may be a sign of good manners to foster and to allow the formation of intimacy among members of the salon. What is important here is the fluidity of the lines between the gathering as one and the gathering as many units of intimacy, and how the salons can be both private and public, both shared and intimate.

A new ideal of humanity; the joy of conversation;²⁶ the search for friendship and the cultivation of intimacy—these are the ideals and aspirations of the salon phenomena in the age of modernity. Of course, the cleavage between ideals and reality accompany the salons no less than they do other social phenomena: despite their egalitarian humanist rhetoric, class, rank, and religious differences continue to play a role. The salons are not spaces for the whole people, including the laborers, the gardener, the milk maid, and the coach driver. They are largely upper-middle-class phenomena. The working and laboring classes of Europe in this period share a different mode of sociability of their own.²⁷ As Rahel Varnhagen's own experience shows, many of her lovers of noble descent (most notably Count von Finckenstein) are unable to overcome class biases; and with the defeat of the German armies in the hands of Napoleon and the rise of German nationalism, anti-Semitic feelings immediately come to the fore. Neither are the salons protected spaces of friendship and intimacy alone; intrigues, jealousies, petty fighting, and even treachery have their place here; as do erotic and sexual jealousy, infidelity, and betrayal.

The phenomenon of the salons, the predominance of the women among them, the kinds of public spaces they are, and the forms of interaction, speech, and writing most closely associated with them pose fascinating problems for Hannah Arendt's political philosophy. Almost in every respect the salons, as modes of the public sphere, contradict the *agonal* model of the public sphere of the polis that predominates in *The Human Condition*. Whereas the Greek polis and the public sphere characteristic of it exclude women (and other members of the household such as children and servants generally), the salons are spaces dominated by female presence. Whereas speech in the public spaces of the polis is "serious," guided by the concern for the "good of all," speech in the salons is playful, amorphous, and freely mixes the good of all with the advantage of each. Whereas the public sphere of the polis attempts to exclude and to suppress eros, the salons cultivate the erotic. Of course, the erotic is never silenced in the Greek public sphere either: more often than not, it assumes a homosexual rather than heterosexual form. Whereas the spaces of the polis are governed by the ideals of "visibility" and "transparency," eighteenth-century salons are also governed by "visibility," but not by transparency: self-revelation and self-concealment, even pretending to be quite other than one is, are the norms.

Yet the salons and the polis also have features in common: they are based on assumptions of equality among the participants. In the case of the polis, this is the *isonomia* of political rank as citizen and of economic independence as *oikos despotes*. For the salon participants, equality is an ideal based on their shared humanity and their specific talents, abilities, and capabilities as individuals sharing certain tastes and sensibilities. Such equality prevails against otherwise existing social, economic, and even political inequality among salon members. Both the public spheres of the polis and the salons form bonds among their members. According to Aristotle, "friendship" among citizens of the polis is the virtue that good lawgivers try most to cultivate.²⁸ The salons are also spaces in which friendships are formed: these friendships are more personal than political, but here again the lines are not clear; the salons are spaces in which personal friendships may result in political bondings (what we nowadays ubiquitously refer to as "networking"). In effect, both the polis and the salons contribute to the formation of "civic friendship," either among a group of citizens or among a group of private, like-minded individuals who can gather for a common political purpose.²⁹ If we proceed to decenter Arendt's political thought, if we read her work from the margins toward the center, then we can displace her fascination with the polis to make room for her more modernist and women-friendly reflections on the salons. The "salons" must be viewed as transitory but also

fascinating precursors of a certain transgression of the boundaries between the public and the private.³⁰ Arendt developed her political philosophy to ward off such transgressions, but as a radical democrat she could not but welcome such transgression if they resulted in authentic political action, in a community of "speech and action."

It is my thesis that the alternative genealogy of modernity suggested by 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. First, as a historian of anti-Semitism and totalitarianism, Arendt focuses on transformations occurring in this sphere of modern societies as they eventually lead to the formation of a mass society. Both the dialectics of identity/difference at the root of modern anti-Semitism and the political power of totalitarianism are located by Arendt, the social and cultural historian, in this domain of modern society. Second, this aspect of the social is important not only for Arendt the historian but for Arendt the political theorist as well. The kind of revitalization of public life that Arendt envisaged in her later work had at least two salient characteristics: on one hand, Arendt was a political universalist, upholding egalitarian civil and political rights for all citizens while supporting nonconformism and the expression of pariahdom in social and cultural life; on the other hand, Arendt's call for a recovery of the public world is antistatist; indeed, we can complain that Arendt's philosophy as a whole suffers from a certain "state blindness." However, if such revitalization of public life does not mean the strengthening of the state but the growth of a political sphere independent of the state, where must this sphere be located, if not in civic and associational society? Arendt's early biography of Rahel Varnhagen then not only brings to light hitherto unknown dimensions of her treatment of the woman question but it also suggests a major rereading of one of the central categories in her work—the social, paving the way for a new understanding of what it means to recover the public world under conditions of modernity.

NOTES

1. One of Arendt's earliest publications is a review of a book by Alice Ruehle-Gerstel, *Das Frauenproblem der Gegenwart*, which appeared in the journal *Die Gesellschaft* affiliated with the Weimar socialists (vol. 10, 1932), pp. 177-79. In this review, Arendt matter-of-factly reports on the book's findings about continuing discrimination against women in the economic and political realms.

2. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 238.

3. Cf. the following passage from *The Human Condition*:

The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden. It is all the more symptomatic of the nature of these phenomena that the few remnants of strict privacy even in our own civilization relate to the "necessities" in the original sense of being necessitated by having a body." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 73. All future references in the text are to this edition.

4. Adrienne Rich, "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 212.

5. Cf. Rich, "Conditions for Work," 212.

6. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

7. See Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 30-31.

8. I am using the 1974 edition of the English translation by Richard and Clara Winston, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, rev. ed. (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). All page references in the text are to this edition.

9. Sybille Bedford, "Emancipation and Destiny," in Book Notes, December 12, 1958 as quoted in Barnouw, *Visible Spaces*, 48.

10. For the cultural and social background of Rahel Varnhagen and the Jewish salonnières in general, I have benefited greatly from Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 2.

11. For further discussion on the unusual character of Gentz, his anti-Semitism, and the subversive gender speculations of his letters, see Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 80-81 and Marlis Gerhardt, "Einleitung: Rahel Levin, Friederikē Robert, Madame Varnhagen," in *Rahel Varnhagen: Jeder Wunsch und Frivolitaet genannt: Briefe und Tagebuecher* (Darmstadt: Luchterland, 1983), 22ff. In 1803 Gentz wrote to Rahel:

Do you know, my Dear, why our relationship has become so great and perfect? I will tell you why. You are an infinitely producing and I, an infinitely, receptive being. You are a great man; I am the first among all females who have ever lived. I know it: had I been a female physically, I had brought the whole world to kneel at my feet. (Marlis Gerhardt, "Einleitung," 23)

12. Preface, xiii.

13. See Sybille Wirsing, "Urworte, nich orphisch, sondern weiblich," Review of the *Gesammelte Werke* of Rahel Varnhagen in ten volumes, ed. by Konrad Feilchenfeldt, Uwe Schweikert, and Rahel E. Steiner (Munich: Matthes and Seitz Verlag, 1983). The review appeared in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (January 21, 1984), no. 18. This edition of Rahel's collected works is based on the early edition from the nineteenth century, originally edited by Rahel's husband, Karl August Varnhagen von Ense.

14. The themes of feeling alien, different, and other; the consciousness of oneself as a "pariah," as an outcast who does not fit in, as they are present in Varnhagen's as well as Hannah Arendt's own life, are explored by Ingeborg Nordmann in "Fremdsein ist gut. Hannah Arendt

ueber Rahel Varnhagen," *Rahel Levin Varnhagen. Die Wiederentdeckung einer Schriftstellern*, ed. by Barbara Hahn and Ursula Isselstein (Goettingen, 1987), 196-207.

15. *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel*, ed. by Lotta Köhler and Hans Saner (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1985), 46; English translation, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. by Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 10. On the whole I have used the quite excellent English edition of the correspondence. All future references to the *Arendt-Jaspers Correspondence* are to this edition.

16. *Arendt-Jaspers Correspondence*, 10.

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

18. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 48.

19. *Ibid.*, 212.

20. The continuing fascination with Rahel Varnhagen's life and letters, particularly as interpretations of her work are influenced by the various authors' perceptions of anti-Semitism and Jewish identity, are explored by Konrad Feilchenfeldt, "Rahel Philologie im Zeichen der antiseemischen Gefahr" (Margarete Susman, Hannah Arendt, Kaete Hamburger), *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, ed. by Hahn and Isselstein, 187-95.

21. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 21.

22. Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times," in *Men in Dark Times* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 4.

23. In a trenchant definition, Arendt writes, "Society 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). The emergence of such a sphere of universal economic exchange and production, in which everything, including labor power, could be bought and sold as a commodity in the marketplace, has been seen by many thinkers before Hannah Arendt as marking an epochal turning point in human history. A century ago G.W.F. Hegel had named this sphere "the system of needs," that is, the sphere in which economic exchange activities for the sole satisfaction of the needs and interests of the exchangers would become the norm of human interaction. G.W.F. Hegel, "The System of Needs," in *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. and with notes by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 126ff.

24. When focusing on this aspect of the rise of the social, Arendt introduces such contrasts as between "behavior" and "action." Whereas behavior is the ideal typical activities of individuals insofar as they are the bearers of social roles, that is, the bureaucrat, the businessman, the executive, and so on, action is individuating and individualizing behavior; it reveals the self rather than concealing him or her behind the social mask. "It is decisive that society," writes Arendt,

on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society 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. (HC, 40)

There is no analysis in Arendt's considerations on these matters in *The Human Condition* of the mechanisms of social control and integration through which such homogenization, leveling, and "normalization" are achieved.

25. Commenting on this period in her most comprehensive and illuminating study, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, Deborah Hertz writes,

During the quarter century between 1780 and 1806 the city's Jewish salons caused a stir at home and abroad. Visitors from across Europe hailed the swift assimilation accomplished by the Jewish salonieres, whose social prominence was achieved at a time when the majority of central and eastern European Jews were still poor peddlers and traders, living in small villages, speaking Yiddish and following a traditional way of life. Surely here, in the drawing rooms of Berlin's rich and sophisticated Jewish women, was to be found the realization of the dream of emancipation that was just then being proposed by avant-garde intellectuals. When the French saloniere Madame de Stael visited Berlin in 1804, she found it easier to gracefully entertain princes alongside humble writers than elsewhere in Germany. (Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, 3)

26. The discovery of the "joy of conversation" should not lead one to overlook the fact that the salons were fascinating gatherings in which the written and the spoken word often flowed into each other; even private, confidential letters were often written to be read out loud in public. Written texts were often first presented, improvised, and altered in the process. Even the literary creation of the amateurs, and most often of the women, were circulated in this space. See Peter Seibert, "Der Salon als Formation im Literaturbetrieb zur Zeit Rahel Levin Varnhagens," in *Rahel Levin Varnhagen: Die Wiederentdeckung einer Schriftstellerin*, ed. by Barbara Hahn and Ursula Isselstein (Göttingen, 1987), 164-72; Konrad Feilchenfeldt, "Die Berliner Salons der Romantik," in *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, ed. by Hahn and Isselstein, 152-63. The relation of the letter-writing form to "female" expressions of subjectivity is also explored by Petra Mitrovic, "Zum Problem der Konstitution von Ich-Identität in den Briefen der Rahel Varnhagen," masters thesis, University of Frankfurt, Institut fuer Deutsche Sprache and Literatur (1982). And this is precisely what Rahel Varnhagen has left to posterity of her work: not a literary or philosophical or political text but her letters, her copious correspondence with her many friends.

27. Geoff Ely, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 289-340.

28. Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. and with an introd. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1966), 20th printing, bk. VIII, chap. 8, 1068ff.

29. The political dimensions of the salons in the age of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution have been discussed by Juergen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) and more recently from a perspective that takes gender differentials into account by Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). I certainly do not want to suggest that the salons can serve as a normative model of a public sphere that would need to be recuperated for today. Their political, cultural, and gender limitations are all too clear. My point rather is twofold: first that the kind of public space that the salons represent should lead us to reread Arendt's concept of the public sphere in a more nuanced way; and second, that whatever revival of the public sphere is possible under conditions of complex and differentiated societies will take place not only in the sphere of the political but in the domain of civic and associational society as well. The salons are precursors of such civic and associational society; they are not models for its future reconstruction but past

carriers of some of its future potentials. I would like to thank Bonnie Honig for leading me to clarify the political significance of the salons.

30. Deborah Hertz writes,

That the home could be a public as well as private place was obviously one reason why salons were organized by women. The synthesis of the private and the public in salons was evident in the curious, bygone way that guests arrived at the door. That social institutions like salons should ever have appeared in preindustrial Europe, even intermittently, came to seem quite odd. It was odd that private drawing rooms should have been public places, odd that in an age when women were excluded from educational and civic institutions, even wives of rich and powerful men should lead intellectual discussions among the most learned men of their cities. It was odd that men and women should have had important intellectual exchanges during centuries when the two sexes generally had little to say to each other and few public places in which to say it. (Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, 18)

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