

## *Hannah Arendt as an ally for queer politics?*

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### **Abstract**

Feminist scholars interested in the thought of Hannah Arendt have often criticized her for excluding the questions of gender and sexuality from her political philosophy. Early readers, such as Adrienne Rich, Mary O'Brien, Hanna Pitkin and Wendy Brown present Arendt as a 'masculine thinker', a theorist who dismisses fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as embodiment, emotions and biological reproduction. In striking contrast, theorists motivated by an ethics of sexual difference, such as Adriana Cavarero and Julia Kristeva most notably, cherish Arendt as a feminine thinker, even as a 'female genius'. This paper examines a highly marginal, but original, queer-theoretical interest in Arendt's works. I show how a number of gay- and queer-studies scholars, since the late 1980s have used Arendt as an ally in theorizing lesbian and gay rights as well as for understanding how the 'closet' operates in the production of myths about sexuality, race and gender. These readings that integrate feminist-, gay- and queer-scholarship 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 was a masculine thinker. They are instead concerned with the question of how certain groups of people come to be viewed as naturally inferior, as genetically predestined to remain so, and hence legitimately subjected to shame, unequal treatment and even annihilation. Why this is particularly important for a feminist project, is that crucial to this process of defaming is the 'effemination' and 'social gaslighting' of certain groups of people (Jewish and homosexual men in this case) as well as the pathologizing of so called 'effeminate characteristics'. This raises a number of important questions: why is it, that effeminacy is needed for justifying the imprisoning, assaulting and murdering of certain persons? Furthermore, what do various moral, medical and political techniques of effeminizing reveal about a society, and more importantly, about the formation of the nation-State?

Keywords: anti-Semitism, homosexuality, race, pathology, effeminacy, citizenship, pariah, parvenu

## Introduction

Feminist scholars interested in the thought of Hannah Arendt have often criticized her for excluding the questions of gender and sexuality from her political philosophy. In striking contrast to Simone de Beauvoir for instance, questions regarding gender equality are absent from Arendt's theoretical reflections, despite the fact that she wrote on remarkable women such as Rosa Luxemburg, Rahel Varnhagen and Karen Blixen. In fact, some of Arendt's key conceptual distinctions such as the 'public' vs. 'private', 'political' vs. 'social' and 'labor' vs. 'action' may seem to imply an elitist theoretical and ontological framework that risks excluding women from the political realm of action altogether (e.g. Pitkin 1981; Brown 1988; Benhabib 1995; Dietz 1995; Moruzzi 2001). In addition, Arendt herself was not interested in theorizing questions related to feminist politics.

Early readers, such as Rich (1979), O'Brien (1981), Pitkin (1981, 1998) and Brown (1988) present Arendt as a 'masculine thinker', a theorist who crudely dismisses fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as embodiment, emotions and biological reproduction. These theorists associate Arendt with a nostalgic Graecophilia that manifests in her idealization of stereotypically male/masculine values and norms, such as heroism, courage, public risk-taking, emotional control, agonism as well as a strict distinction between the private and the public realms.

According to Adrienne Rich, *The Human Condition* is a "lofty and crippled book", that shows the example of the "tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology" (Rich 1979, 211–212). Hannah Pitkin laments that "[t]hrough Arendt was female, there is a lot of *machismo* in her vision" (Pitkin 1981, 338). For Mary O'Brien, Arendt promotes "the normality and even the necessity of male supremacy" (O'Brien 1981, 99–100). Wendy Brown diagnoses Arendt as a pathological masculinist (Brown 1988) and Jennifer Ring contends that "Arendt was more 'macho' than the men she criticized experienced themselves as being" and that "Arendt's flight from femininity" comes with a high price, because "denying one's gender" involves "[t]he ultimate risk of any sort of denial" which is "inauthenticity and fear of self" (Ring 1998, 286, 285). Furthermore, Dana Villa (2008) recalls how "one prominent scholar" once said that Arendt is like "Carl Schmitt in drag" (Villa 2008, 351).

Yet, despite this trend and in striking contrast, theorists motivated by an ethics of sexual difference, such as Adriana Cavarero (1995, 2003) and Julia Kristeva (1999) most notably, cherish Arendt as a feminine thinker, even as a 'female genius'. Instead of focusing on what Arendt ignores, dismisses or simply rejects, Cavarero and Kristeva highlight gynocentric, textual philosophical imagery such as 'birth' that are taken to reflect feminine experiences in Arendt's

writings. The conceptual connection between *natality* and sexual difference in particular functions here as a theoretical matrix, through which Arendt emerges as a feminine thinker.

Although intriguing, I hold both of these angles to Arendt to be only partly successful, since they take momentum from certain unquestioned presumptions about gender. Early, critical feminist interpreters confront Arendt's assumed masculinity due to the fact they understand 'manhood' and 'masculinity' in a restricted sense, as representing hegemonic, patriarchal and chauvinist norms and ideals<sup>1</sup>. These readings as well as the gynocentric interpretations paradoxically end up strengthening conservative notions of masculinity, because they affirm, emphasize and construct 'femininity' as the polar opposite of masculinity. In this paper I argue that these type of approaches to Arendt miss intriguing aspects of alternative, non-normative masculinities and femininities hidden in Arendt's works, such as in her reading of Proust, Kafka, Chaplin and most importantly, the genealogy of the social construction of 'Jewishness' and 'homosexuality' as effeminate, psychopathological, racial categories. I contend that in works such as *Jewish Writings* as well as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's ideal citizen and hero is 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 in Arendt's writings, 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), there is an important link between effeminacy and second class citizenship to be explored in Arendt's texts. My claim is that despite Arendt's silence on gender, her texts may help us shed light on the question of how it is that femininity has become a primary figure of abjection in Western political culture?

Arendt's analysis of the rise of modern anti-Semitism has triggered a highly original, queer-theoretical interest in her works. A number of gay- and queer-studies scholars, since the late 1980s have used Arendt as an ally in 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; Warner 2005; Brenkman 2002, Feit 2011).<sup>2</sup> I take my departure from this marginal, interpretative trend. I find it striking that up until today there has been no systematic examination of these marginal, gay- and queer-studies voices in secondary literature on Arendt. Yet, I take these readings to be important for any rigorous and updated examination of Arendt's relation to feminism as well as her enigmatic silence on gender, because these interpretations do not operate through a binary, heteronormative logic. Instead, they are motivated by attempts to understand the multiple implications of heteronormativity, such as in terms of the linkage between historical con-

structions of gender and sexuality to race and disability. Hence these readings that integrate feminist-, gay- and queer-scholarship 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 was a masculine thinker. They are instead concerned with the question of how certain groups of people come to be viewed as naturally inferior, as genetically predestined to remain so, and hence legitimately subjected to shame, unequal treatment and even annihilation. Why this is particularly important for a feminist project, is that crucial to this process of defaming is the 'effemination' and social gaslighting<sup>3</sup> of certain groups of people (Jewish and homosexual men in this case) as well as the pathologizing of so called 'effeminate characteristics' (eg. Kaplan 1997; Gilman 1991). This raises a number of important questions: why is it, that effeminacy is needed for justifying the imprisoning, assaulting and murdering of certain persons? Furthermore, what do various moral, medical and political techniques of effeminizing reveal about a society, and more importantly, about the formation of the nation-State?

In what follows, I will analyze Didier Eribon's (1999) interpretation of Arendt as 'the philosopher of the gay movement' as well as highlight certain similarities between Eribon's reading and that of Seyla Benhabib (1993). Both theorists pick out same-sex marriage as an example of government enforced discrimination and use Arendt to defend marriage equality. I will point out the strengths and limitations of these readings and then move on to examine Morris B. Kaplan's (1997) queering of Arendt. Interestingly, both Eribon and Kaplan use Arendt's reading of 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, Morris B. Kaplan goes further than Eribon and Benhabib by questioning the usefulness of identity-politics. He does this by reading Arendt through Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (1991). I show how Kaplan constructs an interpretative prism through which the complexity of race, gender, sexuality and disability become interlinked in 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Semitic and homophobic discourse. Finally, I will point out some important aspects of this critical engagement with Arendt's texts that have relevance for contemporary minority rights struggles as well as feminist politics.

### **Hannah 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 Gomorrhe)* in order to give an account of how Proust’s depiction of the ‘accused 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 contends 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>4</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 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.

Due to the fact that Proust himself was a social climber and an active socialite in the high society salons of Paris, Arendt contends 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 material for *In Search of Lost Time (À la recherche du temps perdu)*<sup>5</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 contends 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>6</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. 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 gaslighting 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 contends 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* [*History of Sexuality* I], especially for the moment in which he describes the nineteenth-century invention by psychiatry of the personage of the ‘homosexual,’ 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 2004, 417n18.)

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>7</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’.

Various coping-mechanisms were born in junction with the dawn of modern anti-Semitism. Arendt uses an important conceptual distinction between the *parvenu* and the *pariah* to describe some of the ways of responding to anti-Semitism. The *parvenu* tries to assimilate and dissolve 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. Both the *parvenu* and the *pariah* escape participating in *political* resistance. Arendt’s critique of the social is in many significant ways a critique of high society in particular. Through the creation of the salon, figures such as Rahel Varnhagen and Marcel Proust attempted to become “normal”, as members of the German and French respectable high society, and in the process ended up compromising and conforming to the very same social order that had led to their political discriminated in the first place (JP, 71, 76–78). The salon represents for Arendt a dream-like world, which allows for the 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>8</sup>.

Hence Arendt contends 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, was 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 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*. This aspect is something that Eribon values greatly and where he locates Arendt’s potential as “the philosopher of the gay movement” (Eribon 2004, 349). The figure of the conscious pariah resists social conformism and fights publically against legal and political discrimination. Eribon explains how one can escape the gridlock of exclusion:

“*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 2004, 348 italics added).

The parallel to so called openly gay persons and closeted ones is obvious. Eribon contends 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 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 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 2004, 345 italics added)

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 to marry. 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” (RLR, 203) For Eribon, Arendt’s passionate opposition to southern anti-miscegenation laws – also known as Jim Crow laws – can according to Eribon 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? In my view, Eribon’s argument rests here on identity-politics, as if ‘women’, ‘gay men’ and ‘lesbians’ were unified and homogenous groups and as if the complex dynamics of exclusion and discrimination could be solved by simply including these groups in certain institutions, such as marriage. This goes contrary to what both Arendt and Foucault envisioned in their writings. Furthermore, Eribon’s argumentative jump from 19th century anti-Semitic France and Germany to the 20th century European feminist- and gay liberation movements is no less than perplexing, apart from the idea of extracting the concept of the ‘conscious pariah’ from its original context and utilizing it for more contemporary projects. Hence, Eribon’s project of drawing from Arendt in order to theorize minority rights is in need of amending.

Interestingly, in “Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt’s concept of public space” (1993), also Benhabib, just like Eribon, 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 makes another important insight and 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 the ‘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, contends Benhabib. This goes contrary to the common 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. 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." This concept of 'privacy' is something that Benhabib claims "...feminist theorists must not only share but also cultivate" (Benhabib 1993, 107).

"[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 push Arendt into directions that she herself did not envision. Still, there is an even deeper insight in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that neither Eribon nor Benhabib digs into. 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.

### **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. I contend that Eribon's and Benhabib's analyses are a promising beginning to theorize gender and sexuality through Arendt, but need to be taken further to include other issues than intimate partnership and domesticity.

Morris B. Kaplan (1997), just like Eribon, contends 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 America still under sodomy laws<sup>9</sup>, Kaplan passionately defends the rights of 'queer citizens' with reference to Arendt's theorizing of the history of anti-Semitism as well as her 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 to take much further than Benhabib and Eribon. Well aware of the popularity of Proust among gay studies schol-

ars, 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 Benhabib and Eribon 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 cheers 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 contends 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 Didier Eribon, Kaplan is interested in multiple forms of queer political organizing and queer intimacy, not simply the cheering for marriage-equality.

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* (2000) 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 2000, 88–89)

Nancy Polikoff (2008) strikes a similar blow at 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 similar 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)

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 gender. Hence, Arendt’s silence on gender pushes Kaplan to test the boundaries of Arendt’s conceptual framework. In my view, this is a more radical and fruitful path to explore Arendt’s potential for feminist politics than that of Eribon and Benhabib.

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, trans folks and other queers on the other hand must repeatedly either be ‘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’. 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 vis-

ible, 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>10</sup>

Kaplan’s most important contribution 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). What I find striking is that, ‘effeminacy’ in this context does not only function as a symbolic means of controlling and policing the boundaries between so called real, ‘Aryan men’ and ‘men of weaker races’, but more strikingly, effeminacy is equated with pathology. Hence, ‘femininity’ comes to mean ‘disease’. As Jonathan Freedman depicts in his essay “Coming out of the 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.

Also Freedman 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 complex of the skin – were then interpreted as being visible symptoms of syphilis (Gilman 1991, 96, 123–124)<sup>11</sup>.

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 opposite. 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 is indeed not commenting on the feminization of Jewish and homosexual men, she 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) The analysis of the production of excluded outcasts is something that Didier Eribon and Morris Kaplan see as the most fruitful and valuable tool in Arendt.

Kaplan contends 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 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’ (eg. 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’ as well as her affinity to Tocqueville’s critique of the ‘tyranny of the majority’.<sup>12</sup> 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)

## Conclusion

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. More than the explicitly feminist interpretations of Arendt that I cited in the introduction to this paper, 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 in 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 unfitted 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, in other words, 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 to the feminist critique of Arendt, what this means in practice 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? I'd like to clarify this position by quoting Linda Zerilli:

"[...] 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).

In other words, certain feminist movements have according to Zerilli evolved in a historical framework in which individuals either assuming a collective identity (such as ‘women’) or refusing and resisting a collective identity (such as ‘heterosexual’), make claims that are politically intelligible. What Zerilli, inspired by Arendt, suggests as an alternative strategy is to alter and adjust the framework itself by the kind of counterpractices 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). Hence, regardless of the disturbing fact that Arendt never wrote much on the topic of gender inequality or women’s rights, her theorizing of the complex process of exclusion facing all marginalized groups nevertheless turns out to be very useful for feminist political theorizing. As Didier Eribon and Morris B. Kaplan have shown, 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’ even today. 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. The only tragic thing about Arendt’s supposed ‘female masculinity’ is thus, that it has been so poorly understood by her readers.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 See for instance Adriane Rich’s notion of ‘male power’ in *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1978) and Wendy Brown’s theorization of ‘masculinity’ and ‘manhood’ in *Manhood and Politics* (1988). According to Sanchez et al. (2010), an American, outdated and normative, ‘dominant traditional 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) In their study “The Heroism of Women and Men” (2004) Becker & Eagly associate precisely these types of masculine ideals with common conceptions of heroism. It is this type of masculinity ideology that Rich and Brown rightly oppose, but which they also uncritically associate with Arendt.

- 2 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 controversial *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.
- 3 I use the term 'social gaslighting' (my own term) to describe the inception of certain social norms in 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 trans-persons are led to believe that they suffer from a mental disorder.
- 4 In addition to her reluctance to take seriously questions related to feminist theorizing, Arendt does not seem to have much understanding of gender diversity. On her view on 'hermaphroditism', see Pulkkinen (2003).
- 5 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.
- 6 There is an interesting and disturbing parallel between 19<sup>th</sup> century legitimation of the 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 2001, 523, italics added). This same logic of argumentation is common to homophobic and transphobic defense of perpetrators in hate crime cases, namely, that there is something innate about the victim that provokes violence. An example 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 transwomen 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).
- 7 Foucault contends 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 some-

- thing 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.)
- 8 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 great 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 (eg. Arendt 1958, 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 was according to her also the case of Rahel Varnhagen (cf. Parvikko 1996).
  - 9 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 other hand and homosexual conduct on the other has been demonstrated” (quoted in Wacks 2010, 60). 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 the 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).
  - 10 In a 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)
  - 11 This image of the Jew as a carrier and contaminator of syphilis is later popularized by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. A parallel between anti-Semitism and homophobia can be

seen in the way the 1980s AIDS pandemic stigmatized gay men as sexually perverse carriers of disease. Both discourses rely on 'hygiene' and 'disease'.

- 12 Arendt's critique of the social is beyond the scope of this essay, but let me briefly point out some important aspects of this critique. Arendt's affinity to Foucault's later development of biopolitics is evident in this critique. For Arendt, the 'social', functions like one massive household, in which its members are expected to conform to the same interest. Bureaucracy is the government that best exemplifies the order of the social (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; cf. OT, 54) According to Arendt, the pretentious equality of the social is not based on political equality, but on a coerced normalizing power that assumes everyone to be the same. The birth of new 'social sciences', such as 'economics', 'statistics' and 'population analysis' coincides with the rise of the social and thus "[...] men had become social beings [that] unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep to the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal." (HC, 42). According to Arendt, 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. "[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).
- 13 I want to thank the two blind referees of this article, as well as Penelope Deutscher, Tuija Pulkkinen, Sanna Karhu, Heta Rundgren and Eeva Urrio for comments to a previous draft of the paper.

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