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****Research Article****

Arendt's Rahel Varnhagen: Challenging The Public - Private Dichotomy*

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Abstract

Rahel Varnhagen, among the earliest works of Hannah Arendt, is often treated as an isolated piece in relation to her later political writings. However, this factual biography challenges one of the most inalienable elements in Arendt's political theory: the public- private dichotomy. I argue that *Rahel* can be read as an exploration of the public or the private, that Varnhagen herself can be classified as either a parvenu or a pariah. A closer reading reveals that *Rahel*, as text and as individual, blurs this binary distinction. This blurring, in one exceptional text, helps to undermine the strict conceptual binary between public and private that is assumed to run through all of Arendt's work. In *Rahel*, the political is not observed within the confines of a strict separation between the public and the private, but in an intermediate space: the social sphere of the eighteenth century salon. Identifying a conception of the social within Arendt's political theory that is not detrimental to political actors and their actions would provide us a new reading of the social that is affirmative rather than negative. Such a reading would pave the way for a more inclusive reading of the social in Arendt, through which several "social" issues that are excluded from the political sphere may be recognized and re-conceptualized as political.

Keywords: Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt, the public, the private, the social.

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****Araştırma Makalesi****

Arendt'in Rahel Varnhagen'i: Kamusal-Özel Dikotomisine Bir Meydan Okuyuş*

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Öz

Hannah Arendt'in ilk dönem eserlerinden biri olan *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt üzerine yapılan çalışmalarda genellikle Arendt'in geç dönem siyasi yazılarından farklı ve ayrıksı bir yere sahip olarak değerlendirilir. Fakat bu biyografik eser aynı zamanda Arendt'in çalışmalarının vazgeçilmez unsurlarından biri olarak gözüken kamusal-özel dikotomisine meydan okumaktadır. Bu makale, biyografide, yer yer *parvenu* (irtifaperver) yer yer ise *parya* olarak sınıflandırılan Rahel'in bu deneyiminin, Arendt'in siyaset kuramındaki kamusal veya özel kavramları için yeni bir okuma olanağı yarattığını iddia etmektedir. Bunun da ötesinde, Rahel hem metin olarak hem de birey olarak bahsi geçen ikiliği muğlak hale getirmektedir. Bu ayrıksı çalışmanın ortaya koyduğu muğlaklık, Arendt'in diğer çalışmalarında baskın olduğu iddia edilen kamusal-özel dikotomisini sorgulamamızı sağlamaktadır. *Rahel*'de siyasi olan, kamusal ve özel olanın keskin bir biçimde ayrıldığı bir bağlamda değil; toplumsal olan olarak adlandırılan ve Arendt'in kuramında kamusal ve özelin arasında kalmış bir alan olarak kavramsallaştırılan on sekizinci yüzyıl salon kültüründe ortaya çıkmaktadır. Arendt'in siyaset kuramında siyasi aktör ve onların eylemlerine zarar vermeyen bir toplumsal olana işaret etmek, bizi negatiften ziyade, olumlu bir toplumsal kavramı ile baş başa bırakmaktadır. Böyle bir okuma, Arendt'in çalışmalarında toplumsal alana tekabül ettiği için siyasi alanın dışında kalan kavram ve olguların yine Arendt'in çizdiği kuramsal çerçevede yeniden değerlendirilmesine yol açacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt, kamusal (olan), özel (olan), toplumsal (olan).

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Arendt's Rahel Varnhagen: Challenging The Public - Private Dichotomy¹

Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess ([1958] 1974) is among the earliest works of Hannah Arendt, often treated as a distinct piece, unrelated to her later political writings (Arendt, 1974). Rahel Varnhagen, the subject of the book, was a Jewish woman of great stature in the German Romantic Movement, spanning from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. In this work, Arendt narrates Varnhagen's life through her personal writings, including diaries, correspondence and interaction with her friends in a salon² hosted by her. This text is particularly intriguing as a valuable source for grounding an insightful, alternative reading of Arendt's political theory. This may surprise those readers who think of *Rahel Varnhagen* as a strictly biographic text, lacking theoretical insight. However, prominent Arendtian scholars have already interrogated how political the social could be by pointing out alternative political spaces and political actors depicted in Arendt's works. In their interrogation, they turn *Rahel Varnhagen* as one of the least recognized work of Arendt. Among those scholars, Seyla Benhabib (1995) and Carolina Armenteros (1998), refer to the spatial possibility of a specific facet of the social in Arendt as an alternative conception that inherits the potential of being political. In addition these scholars, Jennifer Ring (1991) states that, apart from the Greek hero within the polis, *Rahel Varnhagen* presents readers an alternative political actor, 'conscious pariah'.

Inspired by these insightful analyses, I also argue that this factual biography presents a different and affirmative dimension of the social in Arendt, which is an in-between space that includes the political in modern times: a social space in which "the lost treasure" of the political could be re-discovered.³ I offer a reading that challenges one of the most rigidly assumed elements of Arendt's political theory, which is the public-private dichotomy. It is well known that Arendt's line of thinking often employs concepts as binary oppositions, (e.g. freedom-necessity, action-labor, speech-silence, power-violence) that would eventually correspond to a more general

¹ An earlier version of this article is based on my doctoral dissertation, "Exploring the Possibilities for the Social and the Political in the Public-Private Distinction in Arendt" (2011)-unpublished.

² In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, people from different occupations, religions, ethnicities and sex come together in semi-public/semi-private spaces hosted by women, especially in German cities (Weckel 2000).

³ Arendt talks about the lost treasure of revolutionary tradition in her book titled *On Revolution*.

dichotomy of the public and the private, which is central to Arendt's theory (Honig, 1995: 144). The framing of this dichotomy has the power of defining the boundaries of the political, which is situated in the public sphere. Thus, concepts corresponding to the public, such as freedom, action, speech and power, are situated within the confines of the political, whereas the other group has a residual character and apolitical quality. Within this framework, I argue that Rahel Varnhagen as a case of personal life story provides the reader with the opportunity of reading the social through the lens of the dichotomy between the public and the private. The book provides us an excellent example of how a political figure could engage in both public and private experiences at the same time; and how this kind of experience would not be detrimental to the political experience of that person.

In line with this argument, I claim that *Rahel Varnhagen* can be read as an exploration of the private or the public, that Rahel herself can be classified as either a parvenu or a pariah, but that a close reading reveals that Rahel as text and as individual are a blurring of these binary distinctions. Moreover, this blurring, in one exceptional text, helps to undermine the strict conceptual binary between private and public assumed to run through all of Arendt's work. This blurred state cannot simply be reduced to the social, as Arendt makes clear that Rahel is excluded from society. Thus we can also observe that 'the social' is itself divided by Arendt into an unacknowledged binary: the 'society' with its repressive, deadening conventions, and the freeing, open spaces of (salon) friendship and incipient small actions. The book, then, is a valuable resource for revealing the intermediate space in the public-private dichotomy through an account of real life experience. The political is not observed within the confines of the strict separation between the public and the private; rather, it is located between these spheres—in the social atmosphere of the eighteenth century salon.⁴ One should look into different facets of the social in Arendt's work in order to reveal that specific dimension of the social.

⁴ How Rahel's own life experience transcends the public versus the private dichotomy is also underlined by Lilian Weissberg (1992: 220) in a different context. She introduces Rahel to the reader as a Jewish woman author in Berlin. Writing letters as a woman and a Jew in the nineteenth century Berlin essentially refers to a private experience. However, this does not mean that this emancipatory act of writing is of an 'unpolitical kind'.

The Social as the Political: A Personal Life Story

The Social as a Multi-dimensional Concept in Arendt's Theory

The social as a noun rather than an adjective is a modern phenomenon that signifies a hybrid realm in which the borderline between the public and the private becomes blurred (Arendt, 1958: 28). The fixed characteristics of the public and private realms are combined within this newly emerging realm. This leads to the emergence of an absorbing and transformative phenomenon of the social. In fact, the rise of the social is considered as the main theme in Arendt's theory. Along these lines, the social in Arendt is simply read as the intrusion of what is essentially categorized as private into the realm of public (Villa 1996: 20,24; McGowan 1997: 263); or it is equated with economics and is seen as the expression of Arendt's reaction to communism, socialism and the welfare state (Pitkin 1998: 16). Reading the social as intrusion of the private concerns into the public world closes the doors for any in-between conception that could be constructive in terms of contemporary political experience, and leads to exclusion of many social issues from the agenda of politics. Yet, a reading that underlines the multi-dimensional characteristic of the social in Arendt might overcome such an exclusion.

The idea that there are different conceptions of the social in Arendt's work is not new. Canovan (1978) was among the first scholars who drew attention to multiple meanings of the social in Arendt's different works. The first meaning refers to high society, " 'polite society of modern Europe, ...the world of the salons...' " (Canovan, 1974: 86), that is a space of conformity. The second social corresponds to modern society administered by nation state, which is dominated by nature and biology just like ancient Greek household (Canovan, 1974). Pitkin (1998) also refers to three different conceptions of the social in Arendt. The first one is high society/respectable society that is referred as the conformist parvenu social. The second one is the economic/biological social that sees society as a bourgeois minded agent combined with the idea of inevitability that is inherited in nature. The last one is 'the other' of the political, which is the defiance of human agency. Following the same line, Benhabib (1996) also refers to three different socials in Arendt. The first one is the social as the capitalist commodity exchange economy; the second one is the mass society; and the third one is the social as sociability that corresponds to aggregation of social

“patterns of human interaction”; modalities of taste in food, dress and leisure time activities; “differences in aesthetic, religious and civic manners”; socialization patterns that contains formation of marriages, friendships, acquaintances and commercial exchanges (Benhabib 1996: 28). In line with these insightful readings, one can argue that there are different socials in Arendt. In its first conception, the social emerges as the intrusion of economic concerns into the public affairs. This conception of the social is dominant throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1966). The social as the interference of bodily/biological needs into public sphere corresponds to different course of events in history, which are elaborated in *On Revolution* (Arendt, 1990). The social as the mass society refers to more contemporary facet of the social and is elaborated in *The Human Condition* (1958), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and in her article, “Society and Culture” (Arendt, 1960: 278), where Arendt sees mass society as a more contemporary facet of ‘good society’ of the eighteenth century. The last one is the social as sociability as depicted in *Rahel Varnhagen* (Arendt, 1974).

Among these different socials, Benhabib argues, the social as sociability emerges a different facet of the social in Arendt’s search for the recovery of the public world under condition of modernity (Benhabib, 1995: 14). Such a perspective invites readers of Arendt to a search for political experiences within a specific social context that might otherwise be ignored. Among Arendtian scholars who employ such kind of a critical perspective, Benhabib and Armenteros do this by relating social experience in the eighteenth century salons to human interaction in agonal public sphere of ancient Greece. Benhabib makes a spatial analysis and touches upon the commonalities between the *polis* and the salon. In the *polis* the equality principle corresponds to the equivalent political rank of the participants as citizens. In the salon, despite the disparate social, economic and political statuses of the participants, they are able to meet as equals based on the humanistic outlook they shared, as well as their specific talents, abilities, and capabilities as individuals and participating in certain tastes and sensibilities (Benhabib, 1995: 19). According to Benhabib, the second important commonality is that both the agonal public sphere and the salon create bonds among their members. Benhabib argues that the salon may be seen as a transitory space that concurrently allows a certain amount of transgression between the boundaries of the public and the private. In a similar vein, Armenteros (1998: 94, 96) also presents the concept of the salon in *Rahel*

Varnhagen as a “social area outside society” which is “the prototype of the public sphere” in Arendt’s theory. Armenteros presents the salon as a social space that could be thought of as a preliminary conception of the public sphere in Arendt’s political theory. Armenteros sees the social in Arendt as a space that emerges as a specific exclusion of the dominant societal traits of the eighteenth century.

These works inspire one to look for a possibility of moments of experience in a personal life story that transcend the dichotomy of public and private. In line with this inspiration, this paper reads *Rahel Varnhagen* as a life story where parvenu versus pariah identities correspond to public versus private dichotomy in Arendt. At some point, it is difficult to separate these two distinct identities from each other. A person could experience both the pariah and the parvenu experiences concurrently in a societal context, and still be political. Throughout the book, Rahel could manage both identities in the associational atmosphere of the eighteenth-century salon as she carried the private concerns to public space of equals through sociability.

Rahel Varnhagen: The Narrated Story of Intimate Self-realization

As the biography of a Jewish woman, prominent in the Romanticist Movement of the eighteenth century Berlin, *Rahel Varnhagen* does not represent a traditional biography in its compositional style. Instead, what interested Arendt, she writes, “...was to narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she herself might have told it” (Arendt, 1974: xv). Throughout *Rahel Varnhagen*, the line between autobiography and biography remains ambiguous, and this presents a clear challenge to the traditional genre of biography. Liliane Weissberg (1997: 5) suggests that what Arendt is doing is to try and slip into Rahel’s skin. Arendt narrates the story of Rahel’s attempts to deal with her Jewish identity, which Rahel herself regards as simultaneously an individual and a private matter. Rahel’s story, then, is a culmination of unique strategies for assimilating into a non-Jewish society. This, in fact, is a narration of being a Jew and Jewishness on the brink of rising of the modern Christian nation-state, and Arendt does this by engaging a self-understanding and self-redefinition (Benhabib 1996: 8). Even though the biography was first published in 1957, it was written during Arendt’s years of stay in Paris to where Arendt fled from Germany in 1933. Thus, the book is seen as Arendt’s reinterpretation of meaning of being a Jew both in the late

eighteenth-early nineteenth century and the 1930s.⁵ For this reason, the book is believed to have a claim to historical (re)construction “from within” (Weissberg, 1997: 17). The change of Rahel’s attitude towards her Jewishness might be read in line with to the change in Arendt’s re-evaluation of and reflection on being a German Jew through time. This shift becomes more evident if the reader traces the corresponding dates of the completion of the chapters. The first eleven chapters of the book, completed by 1933, construct Rahel as an ‘exceptional’ parvenu of the nineteenth century Germany. The final two chapters of the book, completed in 1938, instead characterize Rahel as a pariah.⁶ In her later published essay, ‘We Refugees’ (1978: 65-66), Arendt depicts Rahel as a member of the pariah tradition.⁷ Furthermore, such narration is compatible with Arendt’s methodology in her later political writings, where she substantiates prevalent concepts through the storytelling of actual political events and experiences.

Within this historical context, Arendt points out the emergence of ‘conscious pariah’ as a result of the attitudes of a few within the mentioned pariah tradition. ‘Conscious pariah’ imposes an outsider status that is marginal to European society and parvenu Jews. By definition, the Jewish pariah affirms both her/his Jewish particular identity and her/his right to a place in European (social/political) life, in general (Feldman, 1978: 18). The pariah (Jewish or else) is a political person and her/his duty is to actively remain outside of the society consciously and awaken her/his fellow outsiders to a similar consciousness to rebel against society (Feldman, 1978: 33). The pariahs were a new class/anti-class of intellectuals, journalists, critics, and free-lance writers in the nineteenth century European society (Cahnman, 1974: 163). They are particularly associated with the characteristics of Jewish heart, humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence and engagement in politics (Arendt, 1978: 66). In fact, in Hannah Arendt’s personal lexicon, *Wirkliche Menschen*, real people, were ‘pariahs.’ (Young-Bruehl, 1982: xv).

On the other hand, the pariah’s counterpart, namely the parvenu, is depicted as an upstart “who tried to succeed in the world of Gentiles but could not escape

⁵ Benhabib even argues that Rahel becomes a mirror for Arendt regarding her own self-understanding and self-interpretation.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the difference between the first eleven chapters and the last two chapters of *Rahel Varnhagen*, see Moruzzi (2008: 31, 33, 36-37).

⁷ In Arendt’s essay, Bernard Lazare, Heine, Sholom Aleichem, Franz Kafka, and Charlie Chaplin are also associated with the pariah tradition.

her/his Jewish roots” (Feldman, 1978: 18). The parvenu is associated with tactlessness, political naiveté, inferiority complexes, and greed (Arendt, 1978: 66). The parvenus were the financial magnates and moneyed upstarts of the nineteenth century Europe (Cahnman, 1974: 163). For them, Jewish identity was an individual problem. Their efforts to rid themselves of Jewishness through assimilation and by depicting themselves as ‘exceptional’ Jews cultivated their anti-political disposition in Arendt’s typology.

Following that typology, I claim that the pariah and parvenu, social outsiders in the nineteenth century Europe, can be read as opposites in terms of ‘the political.’ The pariah is political, whereas the parvenu is politically blind. As the definition of the political is structured around the public-private dichotomy, the pariah and the parvenu have their proper correspondence within the very same dichotomy. In the second chapter of *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958: 28, 73), the distinction between the public and private corresponds to that of the political and the household; freedom and necessity; permanence and futility; honor and shame. Sets of concepts are thus bound to each other by their definitions. As a consequence, I contend, the political pariah finds her/his place within the framework of the public, and the anti-political parvenu finds it within the private realm.

In addition, *Rahel Varnhagen* as a text introduces us to a political actor in a brand new spatial context. The pariah as the political actor acts within the confines of the social sphere of the eighteenth century salon—a new spatial context outside the conventional public of that period. The period is also named after these spaces as ‘the period of salons’ “as a brief, happy phase of early women’s emancipation or even as highpoints of a lost female culture” (Weckel, 2000: 310). The salon of the household become a public sphere of visibility that is based on egalitarian principle (Benhabib 1995: 14). The members are the outsiders of the dominant high society of the eighteenth century Germany; they are from different classes and religious groups and use spacial facility provided by the salon to express their difference and distinctiveness through which an intersubjective reality is formed (Benhabib, 1995: 17). Such an experience is compatible with Arendt’s vision of the political experience within public sphere where equal fellows show (make visible) their distinctiveness through usage of words and deeds, and construct reality simultaneously. Political experience articulates reality that is the fact of being seen and heard by others

(Arendt, 1958). Following a similar trajectory, Ring (1991) also argues that apart from the Greek hero within the *polis*, the pariah could be thought of as the alternative political actor in Arendt's political theory. This line of argumentation requires a divergence or a shift in the spatial context of Arendtian political action. The shift is from a need for a permanent place in which action can occur, to an intangible conception of power that is portable and emerges spontaneously when actors act among themselves. Ring emphasizes that in earlier parts of *The Human Condition*, the public sphere is the tangible physical space of the *polis* (Ring, 1991: 439-440). Later, however, political action itself creates public space. According to Ring, this shift is due to the political character possessed by the pariah. The pariah is a political actor without a tangible, physical public space (Ring, 1991: 440). Her/his public space was taken away from her/him in 'dark times.' In such times, freedom descends underground and the light of the public space is able to shine only in hidden places (Ring, 1991: 444). Although the pariah does not act among his peers or a civic community of equals, he acts as an outsider—like members of the eighteenth century European society who find their peers in the salons.

In the light of this shift, I argue, *Rahel Varnhagen*, cannot be read on the safe ground provided by the strict private/public dichotomy. In other words, it is not easy to claim that Arendt's Rahel is either a pariah or a parvenu. Throughout the text, she shifts between both categories and, at times, carries the traces of both. Although she is depicted as a conscious pariah and a political figure by Arendt, her life story reveals an in-between/intermediate character. At some points in her life, her parvenu characteristics became dominant, while at others she was instead a conscious pariah. Still at others, she was both a parvenu and a conscious pariah. In the following, I attempt to portray each of these experiences.

What is especially significant is that these shifts do not prevent Arendt from exemplifying Rahel as a political figure. She is a political figure with her 'social' life, which could not be classified as a distinctly public or private experience. Besides the shift between the two realms, Rahel's life story also provides the possibility of an in-between space of sociability that we call the social space.

Rahel as the Actual Parvenu

Rahel's parvenu status is sealed over the first eleven chapters of the book. This situation arises out of her own conception of what it means to be a Jew. In her own words, being born a Jewess is the "greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life..." (Arendt, 1974: 3). Her characterization of the problem is not free from the general self-perceptions of Jews in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Jews of that period saw 'being Jewish' as a personal problem, a misfortune. As Arendt puts it, "Jews did not even want to be emancipated as a whole; all they wanted was to escape from Jewishness, as individuals if possible" (Arendt, 1974: 3).⁸ Their own conception of their social status as a personal problem signifies their position within the private realm. Personal strategies for coping with their status fail in becoming political, as they do not act collectively to heal the conditions for the Jewish identity. Rahel's experience also remained a private one, ultimately turning back into a struggle with herself. Arendt claims that "Rahel's struggle against the facts, above all against the fact of having been born a Jew, very rapidly became a struggle against herself" (Arendt, 1974: 13).

To cast away uneasiness that results from a struggle against oneself, Rahel employed personal strategies to join the ranks of a society to which she never belonged. Rahel's strategies to gain acceptance into 'the world,' the society she seeks to join, and her willingness to have a place within it, are personal feminine strategies of assimilation in the romantic period: loving and being loved, being proposed to, and marrying a member of non-Jewish society (Benhabib, 1995: 12-13; Moruzzi, 2008: 36). Arendt exemplifies this attempt by saying that Rahel's engagement to Finckenstein, a member of a non-Jewish noble family, was seen as the only choice left for social assimilation (Arendt, 1974: 35).

Rahel's continuous attempts at assimilation are closely related to her conception of reality. As Arendt puts it: "The world and reality had, for Rahel, always been represented by society. 'Real' meant to her the world of those who were socially acknowledged, the parvenus as well as the people of rank and name who represented something lasting and legitimate" (Arendt, 1974: 177) Within such a framing, imagining herself as real was possible only if she were socially accepted.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of personal identification of 'being a Jew' by Jewish people in the 19th century European context see Arendt (1966: 11-53).

However, Rahel sought neither originality nor naturalness; she wanted only to become a person among others by acquiring a higher social position. According to Arendt:

If she wanted to live, she had to learn to make her presence felt, to display herself; she had to unlearn her previous acceptance of the bareness and sketchiness of her external existence as something final; she had to renounce originality and become one person among others. She had to prepare to occupy a higher social position (Arendt, 1974: 119).

Thus, to fulfill her aim to become another person outwardly, Rahel even changed her name from Rahel to Friederike Robert (Arendt, 1974: 120). Rahel Varnhagen, then, did try her best to become an actual parvenu through personal strategies aimed at gaining acceptance as a person of high social status. Arendt acknowledges Rahel's limited success by using these strategies, writing that "[l]ike all parvenus, she never dreamed of a radical alteration of bad conditions, but rather of a shift of personnel that would work out in her favor, so that the situation would improve as if by the stroke of a magic wand" (Arendt, 1974: 201).

The aforementioned personal strategies not only refer to the personal experience of Rahel that are essentially relegated to the private sphere, but also depict a particular conception of the social in Arendt. While Rahel is dealing with 'her problem' within the private sphere, its spatial opposite is the outside of society. This conception of society or the social is both exclusionary and repressive. Specifically, one has either to identify with the group or conform to its strict markers of identity. Alternatively, one may be forced to abandon or repress other, less desirable markers of identity.

Against this exclusionary stance of society, Rahel's salon offered a unique space for sharing personal stories in a warm and friendly atmosphere. At this point, the reader can discern two disparate conceptions of the social. The first is the 'good society' of the eighteenth century Berlin that excludes any difference. The second is instead an inclusive space forged by those excluded by 'good society.' However, spatial construction does not imply automatic awareness. Despite the warm atmosphere of Rahel's salon and her talent in abstracting and generalizing the intimate truths of human experience, she lacked the ability to comprehend her Jewish identity nothing more than a personal adversity and was stuck in her isolated parvenu

status. In Chapter 11 of *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt indicates Rahel's fixation on the parvenu status as follows:

Her passion for generalizing, for making apparently absolute privacies communicable to all, experienceable by all, for feeling out the general human lot in the most personal details—her whole gift for abstraction had, characteristically never led her to the point of regarding her fate as a Jew as anything more than a wholly personal misfortune. She had never been able to fit her private ill luck into a scheme of general social relationships; she had never ventured into criticism of the society or even to solidarity with those who for other reasons were likewise excluded from the ranks of the privileged (Arendt, 1974: 177-178).

Towards the end of the book, Arendt emphasizes the negative effects of parvenu status, which were also recognized by Rahel herself. Parvenu is depicted as condemned to experience existence as a pseudo-reality in a world that has not been designed for her/him (Arendt, 1974: 225). Arendt says that “[t]he parvenu pays for the loss of his pariah qualities [to be grateful, to be considerate to others] by becoming ultimately incapable of grasping generalities, recognizing relationships, or taking an interest in anything but his own person” (Arendt, 1974: 214). Through experiencing these losses, Rahel “discovered that it was necessary for the parvenu—but for him alone—to sacrifice every natural impulse, to conceal all truth, to misuse all love, not only to suppress all passion, but worse still, to convert it into means for social climbing” (Arendt, 1974: 208). But this is the moment at which Rahel experienced a turning point and became an important figure signifying the conscious pariah in Arendt's political thinking.

Rahel as the Genuine Pariah

Did Rahel suddenly become a pariah out of nothing? Is her pariah status only an artificial characteristic that signifies Arendt's own political awareness, acquired while writing the last two chapters of the book? Although Rahel's pariah status is mostly emphasized in the last two chapters of the book, her pariah characteristics are present from the beginning. For instance, in Chapter 3 Rahel is presented as a figure of liberation as she had the gift of being a social outsider (Arendt, 1974: 55). By not belonging to a specific world, her desire to be a part of the world for inclusion and status led her to discover and experience everything on her own terms. However, she also had to learn everything from the beginning. As a social outcast, she was unrestrained by social convention. Being simultaneously forced and free to discover

everything—the world—for herself makes her a figure of liberation (Arendt, 1974: 33-34). Rahel herself was not born into ‘the world’. Others, who are part of this world yet consciously staying outside of the ‘society,’ may also demand a better world (Arendt, 1974: 75). While recognizing the pitfalls of an exclusionary, repressive society, they work to improve its conditions in very specific ways. Removing oneself from the world, criticizing and rejecting the conditions of it, and desiring a better world are the characteristics of the conscious pariah.

Although Rahel is depicted as an actual parvenu in the first place, Arendt later attributes to her the characteristics of a genuine pariah.⁹ Earlier in the text, in Chapter 10, Arendt describes how one of Rahel’s friends, Marwitz, prepared the ground for her transition to a conscious pariah through the course of their friendship. Arendt states:

Her despair was no longer her own private affair; rather, it was merely the reflection of a doomed world [...] Rahel interpreted her own alienation accordingly, no longer believed it inflicted by an incomprehensibly abstract fate which could be understood only in generalized categories —life in itself, *the world*. She now saw it as the specific misfortune of having been born in the wrong place, assigned by a history of a doomed world like Marwitz (Arendt, 1974: 167-168).

It is clear that Rahel changed the way she conceived of her Jewish identity. In fact, this was the crucial juncture at which Rahel understood that the world that she wanted to be a part of had been corrupted. Rahel realized that her Jewishness was not a private matter and could not be dealt with solely through personal strategies. Although blaming her alienation on her Jewishness would not make her a pariah, blaming the ‘corrupted world’ is one way of relating her alienation to society. Being alert to this suggests that Rahel was also aware of her Jewishness and position as a social outcast. Awareness, then, may lead to a critical stance against the exclusivist society.

Thereafter, Rahel becomes an example of the conscious pariah, who possesses more reality than the parvenu. In Chapter 12, Arendt clearly suggests that throughout her parvenu experience, “Rahel had always stood outside, had been a pariah, and discovered at last, most unwillingly and unhappily, that entrance into society was possible only at the price of lying, of a far more generalized lie than

⁹ In Chapter 13, Arendt (1974: 227) calls Rahel a conscious pariah.

simply hypocrisy” (Arendt, 1974: 208). Although, as previously mentioned, Arendt claims that Rahel could not truly escape from her parvenu stance in relation to her own understanding of her Jewishness, Arendt does not hesitate to indicate that Rahel had always been a pariah. Accordingly, in the final chapter, Arendt says that “Rahel [who had a rebellious spirit] had remained a Jew and pariah” (Arendt, 1974: 227).

Between Parvenu and Pariah

It may be argued that *Rahel Varnhagen* could be read either in the context of the private realm, or, at other points, in that of the public realm. Therefore, one may argue that this work by Arendt is strictly divided between two social statuses: the parvenu and the pariah, which correspond to the private and the public, respectively. One may also suggest that this work could be read within the bounds of the public-private dichotomy that Arendt’s political theory creates. With respect to these arguments, I will highlight the points at which *Rahel Varnhagen* cannot be situated within either of the status or distinctions. As argued in the introduction, a close reading reveals that Rahel as text and as individual is a blurring of these binary distinctions. And this obfuscation, in one exceptional Arendt text, helps to undermine the strict conceptual binary between public and private, which is assumed to run through all of Arendt’s work.

Firstly, regarding the personal parvenu strategies that Rahel employed during her struggle to join the social world, it is clear that her strategies were not exclusively related to the feminine strategies mentioned above. In other words, her parvenu strategies were not confined to the privacy of concepts such as marriage and family. In addition to the strategies of relating oneself to others in intimate relationships, Arendt also relates Rahel’s story of personal exit strategies to avoid the problem of ‘worldlessness.’ For instance, in Chapter 5, the reader witnesses how Rahel chose piety as a means to connect to other beings, namely through God. She became devout in order not to be concerned with herself, but to have a link to everything in this world (Arendt, 1974: 80). This link is “a link to God, who was thus to be the ultimate guarantee of her existence, whose “child” she was and upon whose “mantle” she lay” (Arendt, 1974: 80).¹⁰ Another personal experience, stated in Chapter 12,

¹⁰ The God Rahel refers to is neither her ancestors’ nor the god of Christianity. Arendt says that with respect to religion Rahel is traditionless.

was Rahel's celebration of her Prussian citizenship through marrying August Varnhagen (Arendt, 1974: 204). Although she initially resisted becoming a nationalist, acquiring a sense of reality she lacked and feeling included by an entity shaped her personal experience and stance in the nineteenth century European context afterwards. With regard to this point, one could accuse Rahel of opportunism, since she embraced patriotism only after realizing that she would otherwise be isolated from society (Arendt, 1974: 101). These two examples are significant in revealing Rahel's complex nature, combining the parvenu (private) and the pariah (public) throughout life and text.

More importantly, these examples demonstrate this varied experience at two different levels. The first example, the link with others through God, is often considered in modern, secularist times as an inherently internal, private link through personal belief, even if it is expected to transmit a feeling of fellowship. However the second example, described in the latter half of the book, characterizes the link with others through citizenship as inherently public and political. Despite both being endeavors of connecting oneself to others through pursuit of a feeling of belongingness, these two experiences oscillate between being private and public.

The common characteristic in question becomes the second level of analysis. Even though these were the endeavors of a parvenu, it is interesting to observe that they are not limited to the feminine private strategies but had more to do with broader concepts and projects, such as nationalism. Rahel, however, faced a dilemma. Although she tried to maintain her 'self,' that is, her privacy, to some extent, Rahel understood that this was impossible to achieve on her own. She had a desire to get to know herself through a third party, namely God or the idea of national belonging. This demonstrates that a concern for cultivating private 'self' could result in public concerns. In other words, this is an intermediate 'social' experience where private and public concerns are merged.

Moreover, it could be argued that these are all personal strategies and, therefore, cursed to remain among the strategies of the parvenu, without the traces of pariah status. One response to such an objection would come directly from Arendt. In Chapter 7, Arendt writes, "[f]or all that her later patriotism may have seemed opportunistic, for all that it assumed parvenu forms, the fact remains that she reached it strictly by insight, reason, principled convictions" (Arendt, 1974: 127). This is

actually what a conscious pariah would do. When we observe that a parvenu may act with the insight and conviction characteristic of a pariah, the absolute distinction between the two ways of life is obscured. Rather than being mutually-exclusives, they could co-exist. Private concerns, moreover, may be enacted through public and political insights. This is a pointed example of how the private and public spheres of concern can combine to produce a political experience. Such a blurred experience of the private and the public does not need to point a 'social' experience that would be detrimental to the political.

Rahel's intertwined experience of her parvenu and pariah statuses is also evident in the contradictions she experienced when shifting from one status to another. In particular, Arendt describes the example of the attempt to change her name from Rahel to Friederike Robert as follows: "The former was not socially acceptable; the latter could not summon up the resolution to make a fraudulent self-identification" (Arendt, 1974: 212). This reveals the contradiction inherent under the guise of two distinct, perhaps competing, identities. On one hand, as Rahel, she would be deprived of what general social conditions might offer. On the other, her attempt to acquire a social existence as Friederike would mean sacrificing the intimate knowledge of herself, which she had gained through the experiences of living as the outsider Rahel (Arendt, 1974: 213). This also exposes the contradictory requirements of self-survival. Arendt states that Rahel could not unburden herself of her "faults": gratitude and consideration of others.

Her openness to the world and awareness of the sensitivities of others meant that she could never achieve the ruthless self-concern necessary for a true parvenu success. Arendt says "Rahel never rid herself of her 'faults.' They kept her from becoming a real parvenu, from feeling happy as a parvenu" (Arendt, 1974: 214). Additionally, to be a real parvenu, one should be prepared to abandon the personal truth of one's own experience of oneself, which, as Arendt (1974: 205) indicates, neither Rahel nor society was ready to do:

This tendency to undo what she had achieved gathered strength as she became aware that her rise was only a semblance, that a pariah remained, in truly good society, nothing but a parvenu, that she could not escape her intolerably exposed position, any more than she could escape insults (Arendt, 1974: 210).

Both internally and externally, Rahel's identity remained a conglomerate of pariah and parvenu status. This became a great source of contradiction for Rahel and further demonstrates the difficulty in separating her parvenu experience from that of the pariah in both life and text.

Rahel emerges out of Arendt's text as a double figure. Even though Rahel lived as an actual parvenu for some part of her life, she also carried the characteristics of the pariah for herself and society. Yet, even when characterized by Arendt as a conscious pariah, Rahel was also aware that within the society she had now entered, she remained a parvenu. This situation transcends the public versus private dichotomy in Arendt's theory. Even though one needs to leave private concerns behind to be political, Rahel could become political while carrying traces of the private and the first-hand experience of what it is to be a parvenu. A woman who became a conscious pariah and was a political figure in Arendt's eyes acquired these characteristics through an intertwined experience in the context of sociability that was neither private nor public.

The narrated story of a political figure whose experience takes place beyond the public versus private dichotomy may be considered a challenge to the mainstream argument that Arendt's political theory is based on such a dichotomy. In addition, such a reading addresses the divided character of the social in Arendt. The concept of the social in Arendt's theory is depicted as a blurred sphere in which the public and the private mingle, which degrades the character of each sphere. The social in Arendt is thus referred to as a hybrid space of experience with negative connotations. However, a close reading of *Rahel Varnhagen* lays bare the divided character of the social. There is the social as "the good society," which excludes people like Rahel and her friends. There is also the social atmosphere of the salon, which provides a space for social outsiders to engage with their peers. This is a different type of the social, one that carries political experience outside of spatially defined dichotomy between the public and the private.

Conclusion

This paper argues that one of the earliest works of Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, presents a challenge to one of the most important dichotomies in her writings. I argue that the story of Rahel narrated by Arendt offers an important

depiction of how political experience may survive in the 'social' context of a life story. Taking up *Rahel Varnhagen* as the main text, I argue that the distinction between the parvenu and the pariah corresponds to the public versus private dichotomy in Arendt's oeuvre. Throughout the text in question, I show, it is often difficult to separate these two identities from each other. An individual may experience both the pariah and the parvenu identities simultaneously in a given social context. Yet such an experience need not be detrimental to the political experience of that person. The person (Rahel here) is often capable of managing both identities in the associational atmosphere of the eighteenth century salons. Through sociability, she is able to carry private concerns to the public space of equals.

This observation results, in part, by reading the public in Arendt as a dynamic sphere that is not given and may be constructed through spontaneous action. Moreover, this reading of the public enables us to assign a political character to any sphere considered outside the context of the political, such as the social. This is itself a challenge to the stringency of the separation between the public and the private. In addition, it may have broader implications and open the doors for new possibilities for Arendtian theory. The social in Arendt is usually referred to as a negative phenomenon of the modern age, which is detrimental to political experience due to its intermediary character in terms of the public and the private distinction. Identifying a conception of the social within Arendt's political theory that is not detrimental to political actors and their actions would provide us a new reading of the social that is affirmative rather than negative. This would pave the way for a more inclusive reading of the social in Arendt, through which several 'social' issues that are excluded from the political sphere may be analyzed through Arendtian perspective.

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