

# Rebecca Adami

## In a Man's words

### – the politics of female representation in the public

#### Abstract

*What one decides fit for appearance through writing and speech bears a political significance that risk being distorted through both language, reception in the public, and through calls for gendered representations. How can work of female philosophers be interpreted as a concern for the world from that of having to respond to a male-dominated discourse through which speech becomes trapped into what one might represent as 'other'? In this paper, I explore the public reception of two female thinkers who question, in different ways, the dominant notion of the author or philosopher as a male subject; what kind of limitations does the relative notion of 'female' pose political action, and how can privilege constitute a hindrance to feminist solidarity?*

#### Key words

*female representation, philosophy, Hannah Arendt, political action, feminism, solidarity, privilege*

Hannah Arendt:

– It is entirely possible that a woman will one day be a philosopher....

Male interviewer:

– I consider you to be a philosopher...

Hannah Arendt:

– Well, I can't help that, but in my opinion I am not. In my opinion I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all."<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction – the philosopher

The underrepresentation of female philosophers has been researched through different lenses that attempt to describe the dissonance that 'female' pose within a male-centred discourse.<sup>2</sup> Challenging the notion of student as male in classical works such as Rousseau's

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1 Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 2.

2 Vera Tripoli, "Intuition, Gender and the under-Representation of Women in Philosophy," *Rivista Di Estetica* 58 (2015): 136-46. doi.org/10.4000/estetica.439.

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*Émile or On Education*<sup>3</sup> (in which Sophie is reduced to a future partner for Émile) Mary Wollstonecraft responded in 1792 with a call for women's rights through her decisive work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*<sup>4</sup> in which she opposes Rousseau's proposal of a girl's education. "Not only was she (Wollstonecraft) female and so likely to notice Sophie – as generations of male commentators have not – but also, she was herself far from fitting Rousseau's ideal of a submissive"<sup>5</sup> woman, as she was a best-selling author and intellectual. Wollstonecraft's *edutopia* for women in society, developed in recent work in philosophy of education<sup>6</sup> raise questions concerning what kind of educational relationships that enable social justice and gender equality.

Regardless of present day efforts toward such calls in academia, the continuous problem of female students dropping out at introductory levels in philosophy studies has been raised and critically discussed in terms of feelings of 'belonging', 'comfort', and 'confidence' in the philosophy classroom<sup>7</sup>.

"Entrance into intellectual discussions is a hard-won battle for women" according to feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who explained her refusal of sharing personal details in an interview 1993, stating that "reference to biographical material is one way in which women's credibility is challenged".<sup>8</sup> She has throughout her work exposed the male-gendered language traditionally used in philosophy. As 'female' in higher education reading philosophical work, one might react to the (excluding) use of the noun 'him' and 'his' in classical work, and to the individual generally being referred to as 'he' and how 'man' or 'men' are supposed to be inclusive of 'everyone'.

From this, I initially wanted to scrutinize through feminist thinkers such as Irigaray, the belief that being 'othered' leads to a rejection of the self that then might be imbedded in one's writing. One way to explore this would be through the notion of schizophrenia as a metaphor for the ways in which the 'female' subject may struggle to express herself without simultaneously inhabiting the public reception, carrying the critic within. This initial interest evolved into a more political concern – of identity, representation, and the possibility for political action – of female representation in a man's words.<sup>9</sup>

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (USA: Basic Books, 1979).

4 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Boston: Peter Edes, 1792).

5 Morwenna Griffiths, "Educational Relationships: Rousseau, Wollstonecraft and Social Justice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48, no. 2 (2014): 341. doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12068.

6 Griffiths, "Educational Relationships: Rousseau, Wollstonecraft and Social Justice"; Rebecca Adami and Claudia Schumann, "Feminism and Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy: Education*, ed. Bryan Warnick and Lynda Stone, Philosophy Series (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2017).

7 Morgan Thompson et al., "Why Do Women Leave Philosophy? Surveying Students at the Introductory Level," *Philosophers' Imprint* 16 (2016).

8 "Luce Irigaray", by Sarah K. Donovan, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/irigaray/>.

9 In a man's words is a paraphrasing of James Brown song "It's a man's world". In an interview on CNN from 1988 when he has just been bailed from alleged abuse of his wife he does not answer any of the female interviewer's questions regarding the assault. He instead continues talking about his new album, his latest hit. Tuning (apparently stoned) on the lyrics "it's a man's world", these words receive a rather different connotation in a situation of a man

There is an inherent paradox in this exploration, that of naming the 'otherness' I seek to problematize. Then, is it only the privilege of a few not to be concerned with 'otherness', hence of not naming that which is nonetheless felt by unjust social practices? Battling with this tension between gendering as acknowledging, and of acknowledging a work in its own right, without the author having to be a representative of difference, I build on Hannah Arendt's notion of political action precisely for her defiance of identity politics.

In the paper, I aim at problematizing the limitations that calls for representations place on women in academia while being 'othered', and how this 'othering' risk distancing one from identifying as 'woman' when asked to respond to 'women issues'. I will do this through a critical interpretation of interview extracts with two philosophers, an analysis building on the notion of *affective dissonance* that according to Clare Hemmings<sup>10</sup> may lead to engagement with, or rejection of, feminist theory.

We might decide that questions of gender are not relevant in any given task of writing and speech, but the significance of representation often seem to be in the interpreter's gaze, in the readers' interest, or in the audience that listen. The influence of Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir, through their respective work on the conditions of political action and freedom, continues to inspire contemporary philosophical perspectives, although they themselves rejected the label of 'philosopher' in order to place greater emphasis on the political dimensions of the writing, and for Beauvoir on the literal. "Deferring the position of 'the philosopher' to Sartre, Beauvoir explicitly claims she is a literary author."<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Arendt has been criticised by contemporary feminist thinkers for ignoring 'women issues' in her work, Beauvoir places the specific conditions of the 'other' sex at the centre for such a theoretical investigation. When interviewed about their work, however, it is not their concern for the world that is placed in the foreground initially by the male interviewers, but them as representatives of female emancipation.

The problem I seek to address is the double-edged sword of acknowledging political speech, work, and deeds of women while simultaneously forcing women to represent 'femininity' and an identity as 'woman'.

## You say philosophy is generally considered a masculine occupation

For Hannah Arendt, appearance and the public are interrelated; the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses need to be transformed, de-privati-

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apparently refusing to respond of violence against women – and getting away with it. (James Brown was released immediately as the charges were dropped, and "released" from further questions on the subject as the interviewer follows up, "all women love you, why do you think that is?" hence not having to respond to allegedly assaulting his wife with a lead pipe and firing a gun at a car she was in).

10 Clare Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012): 147-61. doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643.

11 Nathalie Nya, "The Question of Influence: Sartre and Beauvoir", *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 6, no. 11 (n.d.): 1304. doi.org/10.17265/2159-5836/2016.11.005.

zed, de-individualized into a shape that fits these experiences for public appearance; and the most current of such transformations (of desire, thoughts and pleasure), according to Arendt, occurs through storytelling and artistic expression that transpose individual experiences.<sup>12</sup>

The relational quality of political acts restricts the political significance, weight and force of some people's narratives. To 'act', in the etymology of the word from Greek and Latin, according to Arendt, "contains two interrelated words": to begin and to bear. "Here it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by 'bearing' and 'finishing' the enterprise, by seeing it through."<sup>13</sup>

How some narratives are received and viewed as more trustworthy, or regarded as more objective and given more epistemic weight as evidence in research (and politics) is in my view a continuous struggle of power and voice. I have elsewhere explored the critique in legal theory of the use of narratives in courts dealing with human rights claims,<sup>14</sup> where testimonies of women and children (for different reasons) have historically and traditionally been given less weight as 'evidence' to actually influence historical accounts, and the application of law. For Arendt law is a necessary precondition to politics, and her concern is for equal participation in both, hence her conceptualization of politics focus the process, and not the outcome of such actions.<sup>15</sup>

In my reading, the legitimacy and political weight of narratives are disclosed by their reception in the public. As Arendt states: "The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt."<sup>16</sup> The agent tends to be disclosed together with the act, and action only appears in its full glory in the public.<sup>17</sup> A life lived only in the public, according to Arendt, becomes "rather shallow", and hence the hiding place of the private is a condition for a deep commitment in the public, to have a space where thoughts can be developed through privacy. "Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human."<sup>18</sup> Arendt's distinction between public and private has been levelled against her as not being fruitful for feminist claims for rights and justice – as closely connected to the private.

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12 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50.

13 Arendt, 189.

14 Adami, "The Critical Potential of Using Counter Narratives in Human Rights Education," in *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy Education: Entanglements and Regenerations*, ed. Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

15 Jerome Kohn, "Taking Politics Seriously," *Harvard Law Review* 119, no. 2 (n.d.): 639-45.

16 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

17 Arendt, 180.

18 Arendt, 64.

Instead of seeing the division of private and public as a reason for not engaging with Arendt in feminist theory, Bonnie Honig<sup>19</sup> argues that this distinction offers a possibility to develop an agonistic and performative politics through which to augment and amend what is deemed to be politics. Since Arendt, according to Honig, opposed “attempts to conceive of politics as expressive of shared (community) identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality”,<sup>20</sup> her political account provides an opportunity to develop a feminist politics not built on shared identity, but on constant negotiation of what feminist politics and identity could entail – when not viewed as essentializing.

Honig proposes that agonistic politics creates new relations, in both the public and the private realm. In my reading of Arendt, the web of relations is in the public, so in a generous reading we can see that politics in the public can amend relations in the private realm – for example through new legislation on rights in the private realm – but political contestations occur, in my reading of Arendt, only in the public.

I appreciate Honig's development of agonistic politics, while not sharing her reading that in order to pursue agonistic politics we need to resist the public/private distinction. What we need to resist is rather any argument that issues traditionally confined to the private realm could not become political when voiced and received in the public.<sup>21</sup>

Mary G. Dietz summarizes the feminist critique of Arendt's private/public distinction in *Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt*, stating that “Even those feminists who do not share the analytical presuppositions of difference feminism often find it necessary to acknowledge that Arendt's distinction of public/private is ‘historically invidious’, ‘astounding’ in its ‘denial of the women's issue’, or at least inappropriately viewed as a ‘preferred state of affairs.’”<sup>22</sup> Arendt is in this sense read as placing ‘woman’ in the non-political private realm, hence ignoring the political relevance of ‘women issues’, and in addition reifying this division so as to keep ‘women’ in the private realm.

According to Dietz, it is rather by re-discovering how Arendt genders bodily work in relation to producing work that allows us to explore her concept of action as a space to reclaim issues that have traditionally not been regarded as of political weight. In my reading of Arendt, she explores the human condition in relation to three distinctions of activities: bodily labour, manufacture and action, without gendering the private/public distinction,

19 *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, Re-Reading the Canon, 99-2088461-8 (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1995). doi.org/10.2307/2082622.

20 Honig, 149.

21 The hashtag #metoo is a current example of how what has been silenced in the private realm (such as sexual abuse) when voiced in the public were given a political weight that demands political action. In my understanding, there is no contradiction between political recognition of ‘women issues’ in the public and Arendt's distinction. When second-generation feminists claimed that the private realm is political, this is exactly what they did – in my interpretation: they voiced what had been labelled ‘women issues’ in the public, thus negotiating what had been legislated and not, through politics.

22 Mary G. Dietz, “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 29.

hence such a distinction does not have to be seen “as a key to problems of exclusion and to the historical condition of women in particular.”<sup>23</sup>

Arendt problematizes the conditions for action through a historical lens on how action has been related to property owning, to the head of household, and to those who, by privilege, are freed from labour. Through this kind of historicizing, Arendt (re-)introduces the concept of political action, that “philosophers had failed to place at the center stage”<sup>24</sup> of politics. By doing so, Arendt explores the conditions, rather than the ends of political action, as based on plurality and equality.

If we read Arendt’s distinction of human activities purely as a description of a human condition (that she traces throughout history) without any normative judgement for a ‘preferred political theory’ we may appreciate how she is observing and describing, rather than proposing preferred conditions for political action. In my reading, Arendt’s description does not reject arguments that issues related to oppression and power in the private realm can become political concerns in the public. Nonetheless, Arendt’s division implies that such forms of oppression will gain political weight when voiced in the public. In my interpretation of her political theory, Arendt does not exclude ‘women’ from the political realm since, for one thing, she opposes static labels such as ‘woman’, and additionally does not define the public as a ‘male’ domain.

Arendt’s presumed silence in relation to explicitly mentioning gender can be read as excluding ‘women issues’ from a concept of politics, or as challenging the reification of such exclusion by defying to name the discriminatory structure of the public as historically dominated by white men from privileged backgrounds.

### **Je n’ai jamais souffert**<sup>25</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir acknowledges in *The Second Sex* the social, economic and cultural conditions that limit female emancipation. Woman, according to Beauvoir, is the category of ‘other’ – that constitutes the subject as male. Her work has been read as feminist existentialism due to her description of the conditions that limit women’s exercise of individual freedom.

I find a similarity in Beauvoir’s distinction between *transcendence* and *immanence* with Arendt’s public/private distinction. However, in Beauvoir’s writing, the gendered analysis is what builds this distinction, whereas in Arendt’s writing, the distinction of public/private is a way to examine the conditions for political action. The distinction between transcendence and immanence allows us to see how men have been privileged by expressing transcendence through projects, whereas women have been forced into a repetitive and uncreative life of immanence. Evidently, in contrast to Arendt, Beauvoir described the con-

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23 Dietz, 29.

24 Kohn, “Taking Politics Seriously,” 640.

25 Beauvoir’s words, in English: ‘I never suffered’.



ditions that create sexual difference and limit women's individual freedom as obstacles to economic independence.

It could be assumed that Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* based on the basis of her own experiences as a woman; however, in an interview in 1959 with her it becomes clear that her work was not based solely on her own experiences; rather the contrary, she says.

In the following I will discuss extracts from interviews with Arendt and Beauvoir, noting how both male interviewers, with the questions they pose, in a sense force Arendt and Beauvoir to represent, or deny their female sex, when presenting them as exceptions, as being female thinkers.

“Interviewer:

– Do you think a woman can make as through a commitment as a man to a work of artistic or ideological creation?

Beauvoir:

– *Of course.*

– You may be the exception, but do you think in general, it is as easy for a woman? Is it just as possible?

– *It depends. If a woman has a true vocation, a real desire to write or sculpt, like the late Germaine Richer, or to paint, she will do it as well as a man.*

– The portrait you have painted of the feminine condition is not quite so rosy for women. Have you suffered from being a woman?

– *Never, as I explain in my memoirs. That is why people were mistaken if they took *The Second Sex* to be militant. I didn't even touch upon the issue until, from speaking to other women, I learned of their experiences and realized there was a particularly feminine misfortune. But I didn't personally suffer as I studied what I wanted, without difficulty, and I never met with hostility among my colleagues, since left-wing intellectuals are the most open and liberal with regard to relations between men and women. I never suffered.”<sup>26</sup>*

The writing of *The Second Sex* – the most influential book on feminism – was initially, according to Beauvoir, a theoretical investigation based on the description of other women's experiences. The interviewer reifies the image of her as an exception, and not like other women: “You may be the exception” he says, but can other women make a living of art or writing, that is the question. Beauvoir, being recognized in the public as a thinker, is asked by the male interviewer to represent “women” but at the same time to deny her sex, as an exception to other “women”.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Simone de Beauvoir, 1959, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFRTI\\_9CbFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFRTI_9CbFU), accessed 13 November 2017, 16:00-17:17.

## I am afraid I have to protest

Although Arendt's political theory is not in any way related to female emancipation, extracts from an interview in 1964 demonstrates how these issues nonetheless influenced how she was perceived in the public as a result of the questions posed about female emancipation, on being a "female" philosopher, and of philosophy being a "masculine" occupation. In the interview, Arendt receives the first question regarding her sex.

"Male interviewer:

– Hannah Arendt, you are the first lady to be portrayed in this series. The first lady with a profession some might regard as a masculine one. You are a philosopher. Please allow me to place my first question. In spite of the recognition and respect you have received, do you see your role among philosophers as unusual or peculiar because you are a woman?

Hannah Arendt:

– *I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose. But to speak of the other question that you raised in your opening remarks: you say philosophy is generally thought to be a masculine occupation. It does not have to remain a masculine occupation! It is entirely possible that a woman will one day be a philosopher...*

– I consider you to be a philosopher...

– *Well, I can't help that, but in my opinion I am not. In my opinion I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean that I stayed with it.*"<sup>27</sup>

Instead of defending her work, Arendt has to respond to questions about being a woman *and* a philosopher. Arendt is asked here to respond to identity politics, a response that few white, western, heteronormative men are asked to make. However, if one is in any way 'othered', one will most probably have had to respond to the question of representation of 'otherness' before discussing one's work, contribution, or literary expression.

Arendt questions a call for representation of 'otherness' in the interview. She declares, first of all, that she does not define herself as a philosopher; she is a political theoretician. Secondly, being a philosopher, because at that point it is seen as a male profession, does not mean that a woman will not be a philosopher in the future. (She also questions defining philosophy and political thinking as a profession – for her this is *vitae active*). The interviewer persists: "I consider you to be a philosopher". "I can't help that", responds Arendt.

Both Arendt's and Beauvoir's denial that they share a "female experience", combined with the male interviewer's insistence on defining them as "female" while at the same time identifying them as "exceptions" to other women reifies both the 'philosopher' or 'writer' as male and them as rare exceptions.

27 Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus," 1-2.



Representations of 'otherness' may be inhibiting, through notions of suffering, and there might be a need to relationally create a discursive space for an already emancipated, already voiced 'female' subject in the public, a political position taken through a strong articulated sense of self that both Arendt and Beauvoir seem to speak from, but which they take on, not based on a shared 'female' experience.

"Male interviewer:

– Now, let us turn to the question of woman's emancipation. Has this been a problem for you?

Arendt:

– Yes, of course; there is always the problem as such. (...) The problem itself played no role for me personally. To put it very simply, I have always done what I liked to do."<sup>28</sup>

In the interview, Arendt acknowledges the problem of female emancipation while saying that she herself did not relate to the problem in decisions of what she wanted to pursue. She seems reluctant here to define herself as 'woman' or to discuss separatist women's movements. The impossibility for 'female' philosophers to ignore identity politics in the public reception of their work is a paradox of political action – *she* decides what is fit for appearance, but is nonetheless received as gendered.

Arendt recognises in *The Human Condition*<sup>29</sup> that action through speech, as distinguished from manufacture, tends to disclose the subject, while at the same time limiting the possibilities of that disclosure since it is through a web of relations that our actions are received and where our selves are exposed.

"The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us."<sup>30</sup>

Even in this quote from Arendt, the vocabulary is gendered, which may lead (feminist) receptions of the writing astray. The impossibility for female writers of not mentioning what is implicitly there? In my reading, exposing ourselves through words demands greater courage of women (especially marginalised women) as the interpretation of words is dependent on a validation of narratives that risk creating a sense of homelessness of 'the other' in the public, or a demand to represent 'difference' as a collective identity trait.<sup>31</sup>

28 Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus," 2-3.

29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

30 Arendt, 181.

31 See further Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen, the Life of a Jewess* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997). Rebecca Adami, "Paideia and Cosmopolitan Education: On Subjectification, Politics and Justice," *Studier i Paedagogisk Filosofi* 4, no. 2 (2015): 68-80 doi.org/10.7146/spf.v4i2.22419; Rebecca Adami, "Human

## I try to describe it

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir succeeds where phenomenologist had failed, argues Margery Simons,<sup>32</sup> in defining a political philosophy as she “locates her critique on the margins of culture” by “privileging female voices.”<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir describes a gendered structure that keeps women from leading a political life, which is addressed in the following extracts from the interview as ‘a feminist revolt’. This interpretation stresses the feminist political discourse her work generated, but without acknowledging how Beauvoir extends existential phenomenology through the originality of her subject – that of describing a feminine condition.

“Male interviewer:

– In *The Second Sex*, you revolt against the current feminine condition?

De Beauvoir:

– *I don't exactly revolt, I think...*

– You protest...

– *Yes, but it is not even really a protest, I try to describe it. Because I think it is good to become aware of what is. I think a protest would be in vain, since currently, neither men nor women can just transform things with a magic wand. Women's issues are tied to matters of work, the workforce and unemployment, and by extension, to needs, scarcity, and wealth, etc.*<sup>34</sup>

When describing the female condition, however, Beauvoir became more ‘militant’ as she received endless letters from women who had read her work and who shared their individual experiences of this condition. Through the French *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes* (MLF) Beauvoir pushed later for a law on sexism to be recognised as discrimination against women, and for abortion rights in France.

How is it that one of our most well-known western feminists did not initially identify herself as being part of a feminist revolt against patriarchal structures? Beauvoir's description of the condition of women in *The Second Sex* gives us an opportunity to explore the structures that prevent women from taking on ‘women's issues’ and from identifying as ‘feminist’.

In order to problematize the reception of Arendt's and Beauvoir's work, and themselves as “women” in male-dominated philosophy, I will in the following employ a critical reading of their stance through the notion of class privilege, exploring resistances to feminist theory

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Rights For More Than One Voice: Re-Thinking Political Space Beyond the Local/Global Divide,” *Ethics & Global Politics* 7, no. 4 (2014): 163-80 doi.org/10.3402/egp.v7.24454 .

32 Simons, *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*.

33 Simons, 103.

34 Interview with Simone de Beauvoir 1959, accessed 13 November 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFRTI\\_9CbFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFRTI_9CbFU) 14:00-15:00.

and of identifying as feminist, with the concept of *affective dissonance*, explored by the postmodern contemporary thinker Clare Hemmings.

### **The dissonance between my sense of self and the possibilities for its expression**

When encountering feminist theory, Clare Hemmings found herself opposed to the very idea that she was oppressed because of her sex; hence she refused initially to engage herself as a feminist. "I was a strong, self-reliant intellectual, equal to any boy or man and would not be told that my chances in life were any less than theirs."<sup>35</sup> Since feminist theory tells us that there are structures that limit people's possibilities due to gender – for women from a privileged class- and racial background, those experiences of oppression may not be felt as immediate – this may create opposition to identification with feminism.

When one's experiences, due to privilege blindness, do not immediately confirm descriptions of unequal conditions (for example sex), feminist theory becomes *the* immediate image of stating one's inferiority. As Hemmings elicits, "I simply would not accept there was something that needed changing, and my rage at the very thought found feminism as an object, since the social world could not be its object."<sup>36</sup> It is through these feelings of anger, that acknowledging inequality stems, through which acts of feminist solidarity can spring. With the notions of *affective dissonance* and *affective solidarity* Hemmings explores the dissonance and the feelings of rage and irritation that feminism may arouse. These feelings of dissonance are what might create a spark that can lead to a re-evaluation of one's ontological standpoint.

In the interview with Simone de Beauvoir, she was asked if *The Second Sex* is a revolt against patriarchal structures. She said: "No, it is a description of a condition I became aware of after having listened to other women's stories of oppression". As she stated later in the interview, "people are mistaken if they read *The Second Sex* as feminist militant"; it did not arise from any personal struggle, it developed as a theoretical investigation into the situation of women who lived different lives than herself. As an intellectual at the prestigious University of Paris, and with a bourgeois background, Beauvoir did not maintain a life of necessity, labouring in the private realm, but led what Arendt describes as *vita activa*. This privileged academic position (historically granted exclusively to men) risked placing the call to solidarity with feminism as merely a burden of 'female' representation – hers was initially a theoretical investigation, not a feminist revolt.

There is a large section of contemporary feminist theory that builds on the notion of 'empathy' as a premise for ethical and moral responsibility across difference. This notion has connotations of the asymmetric power relations of privileged people's call for empathy with the marginalised. As privilege may leave us rather unempathetic with others, Hem-

35 Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," 150.

36 Hemmings, 150.

mings wants to move away from empathy and instead build on notions of solidarity that may stem from a range of feelings that disrupts one's perception that the conditions of society enable equity. She wants to explore the possibility that rage and frustration open in the confrontation of feminist theory with our view of the world and the social conditions in it.

For someone whose freedom and possibilities have not (seemingly) been immediately affected by gender, feminist critique may arise images of 'aggressiveness' to be rejected in order to rather stay ignorant of those who are not privileged enough to be able to resist the social pressure of subordination. In the words of Hemmings: "My indignation (...) arose precisely because I did not see a difference between ontological and epistemological possibilities."<sup>37</sup>

In my reading, the *affective dissonance* that engaging with feminist critique may arise can be the very reason for someone identifying primarily as a 'philosopher' or 'political theorist' to defy such explanations. As theories that address inequality and injustice risk arising feelings of discomfort, rage, and guilt – that may lead to solidarity – these threaten the very notion of the traditional Cartesian philosopher or researcher (as objective, value-free, and un-affected by the conditions he is 'discovering' – rather than *producing*). It is hence when we acknowledge academia as a site of knowledge production that the privilege of staying gender-blind becomes a choice of resisting calls for solidarity by keeping epistemological assumptions intact. The *affective distance* that theoretical investigations of the conditions of politics may seem to demand, can nevertheless reveal gendered inequalities, or propose utopian conceptualizations from which political action can spur.

According to Hemmings, rage can, but does not have to, lead to solidarity. There needs to be some kind of affective dissonance for the politics of solidarity to emerge. In her own experience, "rage here marked me as marvellously privileged in class and race terms, as well as fortunate in my family support, and remarkably un-empathetic in my orientations towards others."<sup>38</sup> What had caused this rage? Hemmings describes how she became aware of a dissonance between her sense of self – as free, equal, and with the same opportunities in life as men – and the world as an effect of her affective response, first when confronting feminist theory and then when confronting her world view with these new lenses. How we view the world and ourselves in it, our ontological premises, is according to Hemmings, closer to our epistemic premises, what we hold as knowledge, since in a certain way, they premise each other.

The dissonance between her sense of self and the felt rage she felt led to a de-naturalization of her view of the world, from a harmonious to a critical relationship. Affective dissonance resulted for Hemmings in a feminist identity, but it can also result in a rejection of feminism – a rejection of new epistemological assumptions in order to keep ontological premises intact. Building on Hemmings distinction between 'womanhood' and

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37 Hemmings, 150.

38 Hemmings, 150.

'feminism' as critical for understanding "what motivates gendered change"<sup>39</sup> there is also a profound difference between on the one hand calls to represent 'womanhood' and on the other being received as a 'woman' through words that may reinforce or question prejudice against women.

### Concluding discussion – When will it concern us?

"When she finally said something, it either led to the conversation dying out and being replaced by an uncanny silence, or that the writers, probably in order to demonstrate how independent and sophisticated they were, did not take any notice of what she said but simply continued talking."<sup>40</sup>

I have been concerned here with the reception of speech and written work as political action in the public. Leading a political life (*vita activa*) means, amongst other things, to lead a public life, which demands courage to expose oneself through the spoken and written. The narrator, speaker or author cannot determine the response her or his words and actions will provoke.

When a prominent woman is presented in the public as 'an exception', and also, in contrast when she is presented as 'representing all women', the political significance of 'her' words and 'her' deeds becomes either a questioning of female political agency or a reduction of women's voice to 'one'.

By responding to a male-gendered public, 'woman' runs the risk of representing a social category which has been defined in prejudiced terms, or to defy such identification, which may lead to an alienation of her sex, as 'other'. Reluctance towards, or avoidance of, feminist critique as "bringing in gender" disregards how both language and the public reception of words and deeds may already be gendered. Walking into a room with portraits of former male presidents on the walls is walking into a highly-gendered room. History has already been re-told through gendered male lenses (*history*). Acknowledging this is not bringing gender into the scene; it is making explicit discriminatory practices of silencing 'the other' in dominating discourses of history, philosophy, and politics.

Arendt's description of the conditions for leading a political life when read together with Beauvoir's description of the gendered conditions that prevent women from leading a political life as economically independent individuals, offers us a path toward real emancipation in the broadest sense of political agency. In order to reach this emancipative potential of their work – regardless of one's own (situated) experiences – one needs to critically elucidate how privileged experiences can make a successful woman negate a feminist position rather than embracing feminist solidarity. To do so, one needs to engage feminist critical contributions that expose privilege (Hemmings) and disempowering descriptions by

39 Hemmings, 147.

40 Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* (Profile Books Ltd, 2008), 54.

the west of non-western women,<sup>41</sup> as the process of subjectification of women risks being distorted by disempowering descriptions of social categories. By definition, these categories may generate 'schizophrenic' feelings of self in the private realm. Politicized in the presence of others, women as 'othered' persist in activities that reject, challenge or re-claim identities in the public.

From such explorations, we find the public a scene for constant negotiations: agonistic politics in Honig's reading of Arendt, or a space where dissonance in Hemming's argument may spur acts of feminist solidarity. Personal experiences that are re-shaped in public may hence disrupt dominant discourses, but how words are received is dependent on the relational web that acknowledges action in terms of political significance.

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41 Adami, "Counter Narratives as Political Contestation: Universality, Particularity and Uniqueness," *The Equal Rights Review* 15 (2015): 13-24; The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001).