

Reading the Lives of Others: Biography as Political Thought in Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir

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In this essay, I focus on two biographical works by Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir that I read as political texts: Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess (Arendt 1957/1997) and “Must We Burn Sade?” (Beauvoir 2012). Reading Arendt’s Varnhagen and Beauvoir’s “Sade” side by side illuminates their shared preoccupation with lived experience and their common political premises: the antagonism between freedom and sovereignty, and the centrality of action and constructive relations with others. My argument is that these texts constitute an original style of political thinking, which I call politico-biographical hermeneutics, or reading the life of others as exercises in political theory. Politico-biographical hermeneutics, as I take it, is not a systematic methodology, but an approach to interpreting sociopolitical forces as they come to bear and are embodied and inscribed in the lived experiences, struggles, and works of representative or exemplary individuals. This approach identifies the political lessons of lived experience and supports one of the central claims of feminist philosophy, namely, that the personal and the political are not antithetical, but relational.

ARENDT, BEAUVOIR, AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL GENRE

Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir have seldom been read in conjunction. This is rather surprising given how much they have in common.¹ Both were formally educated in philosophy, were influenced by existential phenomenology, and were renowned intellectuals at a time when the presence of women in such circles was rare. Albeit under very different circumstances, they witnessed firsthand the most definitive events of the twentieth century: Nazism and Stalinism, postwar trials, decolonization struggles, and the emergence of emancipatory movements (Marso 2012, 186). Driven by these experiences, they developed a common interest in freedom, action, political responsibility, and judgment.

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In this essay, I contribute to the joint exploration of Arendt and Beauvoir by concentrating on their biographical works: Arendt's biography of the Jewish-Berlinese salonnière, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Arendt 1957/1997), and Beauvoir's biographical study of the infamous Marquis de Sade, "Must We Burn Sade?" (Beauvoir 2012). My argument is that these texts constitute an original style of political thinking, which I call politico-biographical hermeneutics, or reading the life of others as exercises in political theory. Politico-biographical hermeneutics, as I take it, is not a systematic method, but an approach to interpreting sociopolitical forces as they come to bear on the lived experiences, struggles, and works of representative or exemplary individuals. This approach identifies the political lessons of lived experience and supports one of the central claims of feminist philosophy, namely, that the personal and the political are not antithetical, but relational.

We can find glimpses of what this approach entails in our authors' own words. In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt writes that reflection in times of political decadence is illuminated less by abstract ideas than by the "uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and in their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth" (Arendt 1995, ix). Significantly, this "light" illuminates the political meaningfulness of individual lives *and* the larger political and historical developments that these lives expressed and against which they struggled. For Beauvoir, reading a life in its situation underscores and illustrates the inescapable ambiguity of existence. Lived experience, as she states, "cannot be reduced to concepts or notions." Writing a biography, engaging the life and situation of another, implies living "in another man's skin," altering one's vision "of the human state, of the world, and of the space [one occupies] in it" (Beauvoir 1994, 140).²

Politico-biographical hermeneutics requires a particular attunement on the part of the reader and the writer of the text, one that involves identificatory empathy (a position of closeness) and critical distance (a relatively removed standing vis à vis the other). In writing on the lives of others, the voice, passion, and emotions of the writer and her subject are more clearly sensed than in abstract reflection, engendering bonds of solidarity not only between the author and the person whose life is being narrated, but between the reader and the author as well. These solidary, intersubjective relations allow one to identify with the other while also "dis-identify[ing] from the singularity of [one's own] positions" (Oksala 2014, 397). The contrast between the other and her situation *and* oneself and one's situation allows too for judgment and mediated self-reflection.

In what follows, I separately analyze Arendt's *Varnhagen* and Beauvoir's essay on Sade, and conclude with some reflections on the fruitfulness of politico-biographical hermeneutics for political thought, especially one with feminist commitments.

RAHEL VARNHAGEN: THE IRRESISTIBILITY OF DISASTER?

Rahel Varnhagen was meant to be Arendt's habilitation thesis. She began writing it in 1929 and, by 1933, she had finished all but two chapters, which she would draft in 1938

while exiled in Paris. The Leo Baeck Institute published the book in 1957, one year before *The Human Condition* (Bernstein 1996, 18, 62; Weissberg 1997).

Varnhagen's life spanned from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, from the enlightened absolutism of Frederick II to the Napoleonic wars, which intensified German nationalism and anti-Semitism. Although she was not formally educated, she was well read, a child of the hopes and values of the Enlightenment, and a devoted Romantic.³ Reflecting her existential anxieties, she changed her name several times: from her original Levin, to Friederike Robert (in honor of Frederick II), to Varnhagen, a name she took upon marrying Karl August Varnhagen, a Gentile, in 1814.

Varnhagen's most distinctive social achievement was to establish a successful salon, a meeting place and discussion space for intellectuals, artists, and socialites. The fame of her salon afforded her—a Jewish single woman at the time—a relatively privileged status. After all, the salon, as Arendt described it, was a space where people socialized as equals despite differences of class and rank (Arendt 1957/1997, 127).⁴ Varnhagen's successful salon, however, did not last long. The transition to Napoleon's rule marked the end of nineteenth-century German–Jewish relations, and Varnhagen found herself increasingly ostracized by her former friends and acquaintances (Benhabib 1995, 19–20; Bernstein 1996, 18). It was only by marrying and converting to Christianity that she would become a Prussian citizen. As Arendt reports, she would reconcile with Judaism only shortly before her death (Arendt 1957/1997, 258).

What makes Varnhagen's correspondence and diaries most politically informative for Arendt is that they illustrate the dangers and delusions of the Romantic, antipolitical attitude that dominated her salon. Despite being a social gathering place, the salon was neither political nor public in the sense Arendt would later give this term; it was an artificial, stylized space where gossip and “mere talk” trumped public speech and the “unitedness of the many” replaced political plurality (Arendt 1998, 214). According to Arendt, the salon ceased to exist, along with Varnhagen's moment in the limelight, as soon as “the public world, the power of general misfortune, became so overwhelming that it could no longer be translated into private terms” (Arendt 1957/1997, 176–77). It is interesting to note that, in this biography, the sharp categorical divisions between the social, the private, and the public, for which Arendt became widely known, had not yet been established. We see these distinctions in the making, in a historical situation that holds the spheres in a much more entangled and problematic relationship, closer to what Beauvoir calls ambiguity.

I will focus now on two central themes that first surface in this book and would continue to preoccupy Arendt throughout her career: the political critique of identity and the political importance of retelling a life.

IDENTITY: WHO IS RAHEL VARNHAGEN?

In a 1930 letter to Arendt, Karl Jaspers wrote that her biographical project ran the risk of essentializing Varnhagen's Jewishness and, consequently, of cutting “existential

thinking at the roots” (Arendt and Jaspers 1993, 10). Jaspers sensed an implicit account of a “manifestation of selfhood” that, rather than problematizing existence itself, drew its meaning from an un-problematized collective identity (10). Arendt’s reply is interesting, and shows that she was committed to the principles of existential phenomenology. Her intention, as she told Jaspers, was to derive meaning from Varnhagen’s own experiences, while setting them against the background of the concrete historical conditions of her life. Jewishness, in other words, was not taken as an essence but as a mode of “experiencing” that exemplified the troubled relationship among politics, identity, and the self (11). Arendt’s biography centers on Varnhagen’s lifelong existential conflict: the struggle between her desire to remain different and unique and her drive to enjoy the fruits of integration and assimilation. It is through this ambivalence that Varnhagen becomes who she is.

In her analysis of her subject’s predicament, Arendt borrows a distinction made by French Zionist writer Bernard Lazare among the figures of pariah, parvenu, and conscious pariah (Bernstein 1996, 16–17).⁵ Varnhagen’s Jewishness and her status as a single woman made her a pariah in her own eyes and in the eyes of her social circle. Jewishness, for her, was an unwanted but given imposition that doomed her life, one that she had to negotiate with her friends, lovers, and society.⁶ Embracing the role of parvenu was her way of escaping this fate, attempting to live up to the Enlightenment’s ideals of a self-determining agency and unencumbered individuality. Her strategy for unshackling herself from this destiny and assuming partial control was to aestheticize her life and render it a work of art, fashioning and refashioning herself for social appreciation (Arendt 1998, 180–84). In effect, this was less a matter of becoming an individual than the endeavor to become less of a Jew and more of a German.

Varnhagen, as Arendt’s narrative shows, continuously oscillated between these two roles—the ill-fated Jewess and the assimilated, free, enlightened German. In a manner akin to what Jean-Paul Sartre and Beauvoir called *mauvaise foi*, she sought refuge in each of these figures as isolated extremes, failing to realize the dialectical relation between them. The more exuberantly she played the role of parvenu, the more she reified herself into the mold of an exceptional pariah (Arendt 1998, 210–11). This paradox, according to Arendt, characterized not only Varnhagen’s situation but also that of the cultured Jewish community of her time. As she would put it years later: “What non-Jewish society demanded is that the ‘newcomer’ would be as educated as itself, and that, although he not behave like an ‘ordinary Jew,’ he be and produce something out of the ordinary, since, after all, he was a Jew” (Arendt 1994, 56).

Varnhagen’s life thus presents us with a dilemma: if one can neither choose to be Jewish nor choose *not* to be Jewish, what choice is there? Although Varnhagen herself failed to find an answer, Arendt’s response is neatly captured in a reply she once gave to an interviewer concerning her own identification as a Jew: “if one is attacked as a Jew,” she stated, “one must defend oneself as a Jew” (Arendt 2013a, 20).⁷ This response conveys the dialectical relation that makes for a genuinely *political* identity. It is a matter of assuming one’s identity in an inherently relational and politicized

form—not as one’s personal destiny, or a generic identification, but as a mode of struggle. To echo Beauvoir, we could say that Arendt’s realization was that one is not born a Jew but *becomes* one. Especially in situations where one is denied the status of political actor, the politicization of *what* we are becomes a strategy to reveal *who* we are. By showing our “who,” we performatively deny the existence of an essential, objective identity; rather, we disclose, in Arendt’s words, “the agent in the act” (Arendt 1998, 179–80).

A third existential possibility thus opens up, that of the conscious pariah: an outsider who renders her marginalized status into a rebellious political position and awareness. Whereas the parvenu and the dejected pariah were left to fight their fight as isolated individuals, the conscious pariah could build a political community of the excluded, becoming “the champion of an oppressed people” (Arendt 2007a, 283). This politicization of identity is a more viable alternative in the struggle for freedom than the aestheticization of one’s life, which is ultimately a form of self-abandonment.

Unfortunately, Arendt states, this possibility remained “wholly unknown to this generation of Jews,” who “did not even want to be emancipated as a whole; all they wanted was to escape from Jewishness, as individuals if possible” (Arendt 1957/1997, 88). Toward the end of her life, Varnhagen did, however, get a taste for this alternative. Arendt contends that Varnhagen’s friendship with a *conscious* pariah, the Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, helped her realize that her predicament was not hers alone to bear: what plagued her life was less of an archaic destiny than a specifically *political* condition (Arendt 1957/1997, 258; Maslin 2013, 93, 96).⁸ Although Varnhagen may have come to this realization too late, following her journey, her vicissitudes, inner struggles, and even her failures was an occasion for Arendt to draw formative lessons about the meaning, dangers, and opportunities of identity, freedom, and politics.⁹

BIOGRAPHY AS THE POLITICIZATION OF LIFE

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that death, the most personal and lonesome of experiences, itself has a political meaning: ceasing to exist in plurality (Arendt 1998, 9). Retelling a life brings it back, through remembrance, to the space of appearances, becoming a narrative that can be shared with, and judged by others (Kristeva 2001, 7–8). Arendt contends that “The chief characteristic of . . . human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establishing a biography” (Arendt 1998, 97). Biography is a form of political expression because its point of departure is natality, the appearance of the subject in the world among plural others, and because all beginnings are inherently political; in other words, biographical storytelling politicizes life because it *publicizes* it, preserving the always-fleeting experience of freedom—or its opposite (97, 186, 192, 217). In her text, rather than objectively recounting the facts of Varnhagen’s life, Arendt’s intent is to show “the manner in which assimilation to the intellectual and social life of the environment works out

concretely in the history of an individual's life, thus shaping a personal destiny" (Arendt 1957/1997, 82).

For Arendt, Varnhagen's narration of the "tale" of her life in her diaries and correspondence was restricted to sharing with others her "inner self" and, as such, represented the very opposite of political discourse, further distancing her from the project of freedom. In introspection, elevating the self as the only "interesting object" for reflection and exchange, one ceases to be interested in the world. With this, Arendt writes, "thinking becomes limitless because it is no longer molested by anything exterior; because there is no longer any demand for action, the consequences of which necessarily impose limits even upon the freest spirit" (Arendt 1957/1997, 90–91). The intimate character of introspection rendered unfeasible an authentic engagement with others because introspection is a fatal enemy of plurality: it stifles its promise as much as it does political awareness and responsibility.

Varnhagen, then, turned a "blind eye" to reality; her rebellion against the normalizing forces of society remained subjective and retreating, her inner outrage persisted "without outer manifestations and hence [was] politically irrelevant" (Arendt 2006, 146; Arendt 1957/1997, 91). In contrast to the storytelling Arendt would come to praise, Varnhagen's narration of her lived experience did not open itself up to the future, but remained entrenched in the present and the past. This came to bear particularly in Varnhagen's persistent invocation of the term "destiny," which played a double role in her writing. On the one hand, destiny meant her private fate and the forces that determined it and kept her estranged. On the other, it connoted confidence in progress. Like the self-defeating enterprise of assimilation, this conflicted figure of destiny was also an emblem of Enlightenment values, whose problematic nature was exposed in the lives of Jews, women, and the enslaved and colonized.

In Arendt's analysis, the concept of destiny as an irresistible force that binds the future to the past obliterates the space between the three temporalities, a space that is necessary for the realization of freedom. The past loses its capacity to illuminate the present, and the present no longer gives meaning to the future, becoming a mere bridge into it.¹⁰ By retelling Varnhagen's life, however, Arendt performatively shatters this narrative, endowing Varnhagen's introspection and laments with political meaning, opening them up to the future and to judgment. The biographical endeavor in this sense re-establishes the open space between past and future, and shows that they can still work to illuminate each other.

Although Arendt would only write about judgment decades later, we can already find seeds of her argument in *Rahel Varnhagen*. One of Arendt's mottos is that understanding and critical thinking—active and open-ended processes—are superior to explanation, which from the get-go implies closure and finality (Arendt 1989, 36–39). The exercise of judgment is part of the understanding process. Judgment is a capacity that, for Arendt, dwells within every person; it is democratically distributed, so to speak. Judging, though carried out individually, is essentially political insofar as it hinges on the recognition of plurality: it requires "going visiting," for example, putting ourselves in the place of every person (42–44). Perhaps this is what Arendt had in mind when she said, in the preface to the first edition of the book, that what

“interested [her] solely was to narrate the story of Rahel’s life as she might herself have told it” (Arendt 1957/1997, 81). From what we have seen, one thing Arendt could not have meant by this statement was that she wanted to remain faithful to Rahel’s perspective; for that, reading Varnhagen’s own diaries and correspondence would suffice. Narrating another’s story as she *might* have told it is not to echo her own story while abandoning one’s own judgment, but on the contrary, it is to bring oneself and one’s own perception into the other’s situation. This formulation, which is Arendt’s appropriation of what Kant called “extended mentality,” is a key to her nuanced, though unfinished, understanding of judgment.¹¹ In this sense, the biographical genre is particularly suited for practicing and refining the power of judgment.

Arendt judged Varnhagen’s “who” as it was shown to her, the biographer; with this, she added a chapter to the “storybook of mankind,” which hinges on the story of each human life to the extent that it can be told (Arendt 1998, 184). It exemplifies, but also counters, the dangerous effects of detaching oneself from politics, thus negating plurality. In Varnhagen’s biography, Arendt writes a microhistory that captures some of the decisive forces, and critiques some of the definitive values and ideals of Varnhagen’s time through her concrete lived experience.¹² Microhistories reveal that life stories are not a circle that closes in upon itself; indeed, the biographer keeps her subject alive and underlines personal struggles that macrohistories are bound to miss or miscomprehend.

Rahel Varnhagen’s greatest achievement, perhaps, is to play out the ambiguous nature of natality in a way that is somewhat lost in Arendt’s later work, where this concept appears rather abstractly. Natality is being thrown into history, into the midst of a plurality of forces and, simultaneously, as Arendt would famously argue, introducing something new into the world, the faculty of beginning. Biographical storytelling, in my view, preserves and reenacts this capacity.

FREEDOM AND AUTHENTICITY: NARRATING SADE’S LIFE

Beauvoir articulated the relation between ethics and freedom early on in her career, during her “moral period.” Her goal was to illuminate the precarious nature of the project of freedom, to expose the intrinsic correlation between our own freedom and that of others, and to establish our ethical obligation to respect and further the other/s’ freedom. The essay “Must We Burn Sade?” represents, in my view, the clearest articulation of her ethical stance.

In the fourth volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir recounts her motivation for writing an essay on the Marquis de Sade: she was commissioned to write a preface to Sade’s *Justine* that aroused her interest in the author. She noticed that Sade, in his life and work, had captured the manifold anxieties of the human condition and “the problem of the *other* in its extremest terms” (Beauvoir 1992, 243). Beauvoir locates Sade’s originality not in his literary talents (she finds his erotic scenes boring, banal, and trite), but in the authenticity of his life. For Beauvoir, Sade’s “stubborn sincerity”

rendered him a “great moralist.” She vividly illustrates how Sade’s life was caught in the inescapable tensions between man-as-transcendence (freedom) and man-as-object (immanence), between individual desires and social imperatives, and between singularity and universality (Beauvoir 2012, 45, 75, 95).

Donatien Alphonse François, the Marquis de Sade, experienced during his life some of the most extraordinary social and political transformations in the history of the modern Western world. Sade was the Socratic gadfly of his times, scandalizing society with his sexual escapades and his ceaseless questioning of revolutionary and post-revolutionary mores. Although himself an aristocrat born amid the death throes of nobility, he supported the French revolutionaries, and from his cell in the Bastille, days before July 14, denounced the abuses perpetrated against its prisoners and demanded their (and of course, his) freedom. Once freed, Sade served as secretary of a revolutionary section and, during the Terror, was accused of “moderantism,” barely escaping the guillotine. During Napoleon’s regime, his books were banned and several of his texts destroyed. Infamous since his youth, he spent most of his life incarcerated, and eventually died at the Charenton insane asylum, to which he was committed in 1801.

Beauvoir’s essay offers, as Arendt’s *Varnhagen* does, a politico-biographical hermeneutics that draws a general lesson out of a reading of a singular and extraordinary life in its historical situation. Sade’s life is not presented as a moral lesson on how we ought to live, or how we ought not to live for that matter, but as a particularly suggestive illustration of the ambiguity at the heart of the values of modernity. It is, moreover, a lesson about the possibilities and limits of freedom as pursued in one man’s struggle against a political reality that defined and trapped him.

My analysis centers on two points: first, the problem of freedom and its conditions of (im)possibility as captured by Sade’s delusional quest for absolute sovereignty and, second, the problem of revolt as it relates to nature, the individual, and politics.

SOVEREIGNTY VERSUS FREEDOM

The hallmark of Beauvoir’s reflections on freedom is her claim that acknowledging the freedom of the others, that is, their capacity to establish and pursue their own projects, is a necessary condition for realizing one’s own (Beauvoir 2000, 156). The appeal to the freedom of others renders Beauvoir’s project an ethico-existential one, bound, like existence itself, to uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. For this reason, for Beauvoir, as for Arendt, there is nothing further from freedom than sovereignty, which she sees as the willful endeavor to extinguish the other/s’ freedom. Indeed, the desire for sovereignty is both self-defeating and self-harming. Her essay on Sade sheds light on this claim.

Sade pursued experiences that seemingly gave substance to a radical freedom but that actually, in Beauvoir’s view, curtailed and perverted it (Beauvoir 2012, 47, 87–88). By torturing, murdering, and raping, the libertine transforms abstract sovereignty into a concrete experience of freedom. To justify this strategy, Sade mobilized a

political anthropology that presupposes that (wo)man's temperament is violent and egotistic by nature (Sade 1795/2006, 123). In a Hobbesian vein, he writes that the first human drive is to preserve one's own existence at all costs. Unlike Hobbes, however, he argues that transcending the state of nature does not lead to taming or controlling this primordial drive. Human nature remains unhindered in political society, despite (if not because of) the efforts to tame it. No artificial sovereign or social contract can domesticate (wo)men's destructive impulses; for Sade, political theories based on the self-government of the community or the rule of the state are life-denying abstractions detached from the basic truth of our being. In contrast, individual sovereignty is life-affirming, for it derives from real human nature and expresses itself concretely: the Sadistic assumption is that legitimate sovereignty is individual, and that attaining it requires subjugating the other.

For Beauvoir, Sade's merit rests on his radically honest statements about the despotic nature of sovereignty and the rule of law, as well as on the authenticity with which he led his life in accordance with these concepts. He was a living embodiment of Enlightenment values, stripped bare. Sade's "passionate coincidence with himself," his perverse adherence to the ethical principles of the Enlightenment, is what allowed him at once to translate his erotic experience into a theory of morality and politics, and to adapt ethical dictates into erotic demands. It is in this regard, says Beauvoir, that his life is morally exemplary (Beauvoir 2012, 57). Sade rejected the human tendency to "escape the conflicts of existence" and to "take refuge in a world of appearances" (Beauvoir 2012, 93). She writes,

[Sade] proclaimed the truth of man against the abstractions and alienations that are only flights. Nobody was more passionately attached to the concrete than he. He never gave credit to what "they say," which is easy nourishment for mediocre spirits, but adhered only to the truths that were given to him as evidence of his lived experience. (93)

Despite the sincerity of his testimony, Sade's life is a painful lesson about the stakes of equating freedom with sovereignty and the violence latent in contractarianism's ideals of disciplining nature. Sade's life disclosed these contradictions. As Beauvoir astutely points out, he sought to universalize his singular values, tastes, and desires, rendering his sexuality into a pseudo-Kantian ethics, translating his principles into a moral law that all should follow, wanting "his justice to be *the* justice" (Beauvoir 2012, 87–88, 95; my italics). But this was in stark contrast to the ideals of freedom and individual sovereignty that he so praised. It is not by chance that ruling out the possibility of a common world, or a shared project of freedom, he lived his life behind bars and between the pages of his books and fantasies, exercising freedom as a negative abstraction from his real situation. At the end, Sade's life shows that authenticity—taking responsibility for one's acts, desires, and beliefs—can indeed coexist with unfreedom. In refusing the freedom of others, authenticity is reduced to bad faith, and individual sovereignty to a paralyzing fear to conform.

Beauvoir articulates her ethics of ambiguity to counter this (anti)ethics of sovereignty. Ambiguity implies that the embodied, sexed/gendered, situated, subject is at

once immanence and transcendence, in-itself and for-itself, against others as well as with-others and for-others. An ethics of ambiguity demands from us accepting responsibility for our actions as well as the responsibility to advance the other's project of freedom. Sade's life exhibited the Enlightenment values, the Kantian *sapere aude!*, taking them to their darkest side. He struggled to embody the solipsism and unfettered cruelty of sovereignty and, like the Enlightenment itself did, to escape from ambiguity into the comfort of a universal ethics. Ambiguity, in contrast, shows that it is neither possible for an individual to fully reconcile with others and with her times, nor to freely exist in perpetual conflict.

REVOLT AND PRIVILEGE

Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, perhaps his most political work, is a pedagogical guidebook, written in dialogical form, on the arts and joys of erotic despotism. It follows the adventures of a group of libertines in sexually initiating the teenage Eugenie. The dialogical flow of the text is interrupted when Dolmancé, one of the play's protagonists, reads aloud a pamphlet titled "Frenchmen, some more effort if you wish to become Republicans."¹³ The task of this text-within-a-text is to instruct fellow revolutionaries to tear off the blindfolds that still cover their eyes, daring them to radically question and reject abstract rights and ideals, and to "dare to know" and assume real human nature. The Enlightened Republic, the author of the pamphlet declares, is still to come, and its realization requires "some more effort"; "Some more effort: since you are aiming to destroy all prejudices, let not one survive, for it takes only one to resurrect all of them" (Sade 1795/2006, 104, 106, 109). Inchoate politics, the pamphlet claims, might be gentle and virtuous, but a mature republic must be steeped in violence, immorality, and crime (142).

The text offers an implicit account of the origins of society and its unforgivable sin, a sin that is committed whenever a people defines itself as such, rising over and against the individual to tame his sovereign desires. In what seems like a perverse rendition of Rousseau's argument in the *Second Discourse* (as well as a parody of Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?"), Sade's pamphlet denounces the contractual institutionalization of the rule of law for waging a war against Nature. For Sade, expecting that the infinite plurality of individuals with very particular tastes, preferences, and drives could be subjugated by a so-called general will constitutes nothing less than a crime against humanity (that is to say, against humanity's natural cruelty). He writes, "it would be the pinnacle of your injustice to inflict the law upon a man who could not possibly submit to the law!" (Sade 1795/2006, 119). The revolution's task, then, is to expose the despotic character of society and topple the myth of the freedom-preserving social contract. Sade's mission is not to revert to the so-called state of nature—he is no anarchist—but to mold the polity in such a way that it corresponds with and nurtures human nature, rather than feigning to transcend it.

In her essay, Beauvoir explores the role that nature plays in Sade's *oeuvre*. As I see it, his political theory of nature is twofold. On the one hand, his model polity is inspired by Nature's cycles of generation, degeneration, and regeneration, of creation and destruction, birth and death. On the other hand, insofar as Nature is a despot, the similarly despotic individual—man and woman, after all, were created in her image—must not merely submit to it but, as Beauvoir argues, must exercise their freedom by *imitating* nature in an immanent act of defiance (Beauvoir 2012, 86). Man questions nature's dictatorship, rebels against it, and emancipates himself from his Mother, only to freely assume, and even surpass, her principles of cruelty—which he must inflict on the other and on nature herself—thus becoming the double of nature. Our “second nature,” one that inaugurates authentic morality and freedom for Sade, is—must be—crueler and more antagonistic than the first. By adopting this (a)moral principle and re-embracing despotism, the Republic atones for the original sin—the creation of *civil* society.

Beauvoir notes that Sade loathed passivity in both its public and its private dimensions. The amoral Republic embraces Nature's perpetual movements and transformations and demands incessant *activity*. Indeed, it is action that conserves and expands man's vitality: the expenditure of energy in action generates a surplus that prevents the citizen (or is it the citizen's phallus?) from “growing soft” (Sade 1795/2006, 108).¹⁴ The drive for action is projected into the body politic as the principle of “perpetual insurrection.” Sade writes,

Insurrection. . . is by no means a moral condition, yet it must remain the permanent condition of a republic. It would therefore be both absurd and dangerous to require that the people maintaining the perpetual immoral agitation of the state machinery must be themselves highly moral. After all, a man's moral condition is one of peace and tranquility, whereas his immoral condition is one of perpetual motion, bringing him close to the necessary insurrection, in which the republican must constantly adhere to the form of government he belongs to. (124)

Sade's dream was to elevate his erotic principles not only into an ethics, as we saw before, but also into a *politics* and a *policy*; in other words, to *institutionalize* nature's cruel dictates in political society. He takes up republicanism's embrace of citizen participation in public affairs—here characterized as insurrection—all the while erecting liberalism's sovereign individualism as the natural form of political subjectivity.

Although Beauvoir admires Sade's irreverence and his relentless ethical authenticity, she unveils the fundamental impasses of his individualist ethics and purely negative conception of a politics of perpetual insurrection. Just as he rejected the possibility of communal, or interactive, projects of freedom, so he dismissed the possibility of collective political struggles against oppression, resorting instead to cruelty and violence as a strategy to expose his society's hypocrisies and crimes (Beauvoir 2012, 65, 94).

Most suggestively, albeit a perpetually persecuted pariah, this truth-seeker was completely unaware that he was, in fact, “socially on the side of the privileged, and

he did not understand that social inequality affects the individual even in his ethical possibilities” (Beauvoir 2012, 93).¹⁵ By occupying, as Varnhagen did, a solipsistic bubble, Sade failed to realize that the ethical universals he drew out of his privileged condition could, at most, apply to those who were likewise privileged. For all his revolutionary harangues, and as much as he sought to transform the society and politics of his times, Sade, Beauvoir concludes, was too uncritically immersed within this politics to be able to grasp the meaning of his social situation and its impact on his existential possibilities and limitations (95). Privilege, Beauvoir noted, is ethically and politically, individually and collectively blinding. It hinders the project of freedom and the possibility of genuine revolt in that only those who are privileged by the social order can entertain the fantasy of individual sovereignty and freedom.

Beauvoir used this lesson to show that a genuine politics of revolt necessitates collective action and genuine exchange of people of different situations, sexes, genders, races, and classes. If it is to be anything other than the illusory flight of a boomerang, a true movement of revolt hinges on revealing, rather than indulging in or reproducing, mechanisms of privilege and oppression.

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF READING A LIFE

Political thought has traditionally dealt with questions related to legitimate government, national sovereignty, models of citizenship, justice, and equality. Feminist scholarship widened its boundaries to include reflections on gender politics and identities, discourses on sexual difference, critiques of the personal/political binary, and intersectional analyses of oppression. Political theory is today an “exceptionally wide-ranging and open-ended branch of scholarly inquiry,” free from hegemonic methodological paradigms (Leopold and Stears 2009, 9). What I term “politico-biographical hermeneutics” contributes to the existing constellation of interpretive paradigms and approaches in the discipline by emphasizing and exploring the political significance of lived experience.

By privileging situated experience in its plurality and uniqueness, politico-biographical hermeneutics shows that, as Arendt and Beauvoir repeatedly pointed out, thought cannot be divorced from experience—and not exclusively one’s own. On this point, Johanna Oksala convincingly argues,

A history of concepts alone will not provide any motivation for radical politics that would attempt to instigate profound social transformation. It is only when we understand how these concepts function politically in the lives of real people... that we have a powerful rationale for politically contesting, problematizing, and transforming them. (Oksala 2014, 397)

In this regard, politico-biographical hermeneutics shifts the attention to micro-inquiries—the narration of lives—that illustrate what abstract concepts like freedom, oppression, plurality, and revolt *mean* when embodied, inscribed, and experienced by particular persons or groups. This “downward” movement can also feed into and

revise macro-level definitions, explanations, and arguments, granting them more fullness and concreteness.

We must recognize that, by its very situated nature, politico-biographical hermeneutics is not, and cannot be, a comprehensive political theory, but only a partial approach to political life. In politico-biographical hermeneutics, we turn to lives of exemplary but marginal individuals—especially women, the oppressed, the eccentric, and rebels whose contributions to political thought are still not fully accounted for—to capture, examine, and develop the nature and validity of political concepts and precepts.

Some feminists, however, have argued that the biographical genre is incompatible with political writing. Underlying this assumption is an opposition between the personal and the public, and between individual lives and sociopolitical realities. For example, Joan W. Scott argues, in a way that is reminiscent of Jaspers's concern about Arendt's biographical project, that women's biographies tend to "focus too narrowly on the circumstances of the individual, reducing the thoughts and actions of women to their personal life stories" (Scott 1997, 15–16). Biographies, for her, neglect the role of discourse in the production of subjective experience, and reinforce the idea "that agency is an expression of autonomous individual will, rather than the effect of a historically defined process which forms [gendered] subjects" (15). The conception of biography that Scott adopts here is, in my view, rather narrow, and relies on an understanding of lived experience as *Erlebnis*, or experience in its immediateness. It assumes that biography can communicate only a pre-reflective, inward experience grounded in an unquestioned subjectivity or identity, and isolated from intersubjective, gendered, historical, social, and cultural circumstances. Further, Scott's critique also overlooks the role of the *biographer* herself as a political and judicious thinker, whose reading inevitably endows the lived experience of her subject with a political (intersubjective and historically informed) meaning that is larger than an individual life. With this, the biographer builds a phenomenological narrative that problematizes the oppositions between immanent and transcendent critique, and between discourse and experience.

Arendt and Beauvoir's politicized rendering of experience adequately captures its etymology. The Latin *experiri* conveys an (ambiguous) double meaning—an active *doing* and a passive *undergoing* (Jay 2005, 10–12). Experience is both what constrains us—what *happens* to us—and that through which we project ourselves in our actions and projects of freedom. In other words, experience reaches out (*ex-*) toward, and is limited by what is outside of the subject's control, beyond her reach. The aim of politico-biographical hermeneutics is not to render a life coherent, self-grounding, or self-enclosed, but to illuminate the human condition in its ambiguity in a way that is not always available to the subject in her own time. As a mode of political theory, politico-biographical hermeneutics is not only storytelling, but also a practice of *disclosure*—a critical phenomenology of a living case in which the personal becomes political and vice versa.

Reading Arendt's *Varnhagen* and Beauvoir's "Sade" side by side illustrates our authors' shared interest in narrating lives and their common political premises: the

antagonism between freedom and sovereignty, their opposition to the antipolitical attitudes of solipsistic introspection and self-indulgence, and the political centrality of action and constructive relations with others. Moreover, these biographical texts reveal the intricacies of their political thought in ways that elaborate on, contribute to, and even challenge, their more theoretical works.

Also telling is the odd relationship between the subjects our authors chose to write about: a melancholic salonnière and a manic revolutionary; a failed parvenu and a fallen aristocrat. Both were outsiders that no historian would say has changed the world or shaped an era. (In fact, it is only by chance that Varnhagen's and Sade's life stories were preserved.) With this, Arendt and Beauvoir underscore the political meaningfulness and productiveness of exploring marginality. We could say that Beauvoir's and Arendt's writing of "Other-oriented texts" (Tidd 2004, 155) show that marginality, the fact of occupying a space that is "part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks 1999, xvii) can uncover the ambiguities and paradoxes of the norm from which they are excluded. In our case, these two pariahs, who otherwise share so little in common, are bastard children of the Enlightenment era. Exploring their lives and vicissitudes is to explore some of modernity's highest values—autonomy, freedom, sovereignty, individuality—not as ideas and arguments in philosophical texts, but as they are actually *experienced*.

In reading the lives of others, Arendt and Beauvoir do not attempt to emit a definitive verdict on whether Varnhagen and Sade were free or unfree. They retain the essentially open-ended meaning of freedom and life as projects, trials, and errors. During their lifetimes, Varnhagen's and Sade's appeals to recognition failed; their passions remained apolitical and unheard. Although they fell short of establishing meaningful freedom and of understanding their own situations, their errors and misconceptions are—in a sense—redeemed by their appearing before us as meaningful and instructive on a broader scale. Their lives, as read by Arendt and Beauvoir, become examples from which to disclose general features of the historical and political epoch as well as universal facets of human experience. This universality, however, does not derive from, or amount to, the postulation of normative standards about how one ought to live, but rather from something that we all share: life and experience, and our—and others'—capacity, if *ex-post*, to learn from and judge it.

NOTES

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1. For comparative readings of Arendt and Beauvoir, see Blanchard 2004; Veltman 2010; Holland-Cunz 2012; Marso 2012.

2. I am borrowing from her description of "communicative reading" (Beauvoir 1994, 140).

3. Arendt's critique of Varnhagen's Romantic tendencies was perhaps a self-judgment of her own youthful attraction to Romanticism. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl points out that her original habilitation project, which was abandoned, was a study of German Romanticism (Young-Bruehl 2004, 36–38, 41, 85).

4. Varnhagen's salon was frequented by renowned writers, artists, socialites, and public figures: the poet Heinrich Heine, the philosophers Schlegel and Schelling (and later, Hegel), and Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, among others. She also became acquainted with Goethe, who, Arendt contends, regarded Varnhagen as one of the first people who understood him. Arendt writes that the Goethe cult "was actually inaugurated by Rahel" (Arendt 2013b, 15).

5. Bernstein argues that this tripartite distinction is the "conceptual grid for telling the life story of Rahel Varnhagen" (Bernstein 1996, 16–17).

6. As she lamented, "How loathsome it is always having to establish one's identity first. That alone is enough to make it so repulsive to be a Jew" (Arendt 1957/1997, 81–83).

7. Arendt had already formulated this idea in the 1940s; "A human being can defend himself only as the people he is attacked as. A Jew can preserve this human dignity only if he can be human as a Jew" (Arendt 2007b, 261).

8. Arendt writes that Varnhagen told her husband on her deathbed, "The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wish to have missed" (Arendt 1957/1997, 85).

9. Arendt characteristically disregards the gendered challenges women faced in this context. We may agree with Arendt's interpretation of Varnhagen's life, but the social and political mores of her time would have likely prevented her from undertaking a political project (Benhabib 1995, 92; Maslin 2013, 89).

10. Arendt would write that the conceptions of temporality implied in the figures of the "puller of strings" or the "invisible author" (for example, Hegel's World Spirit, Marx's class struggle, or Smith's invisible hand), demolish the space for genuine action and its capacity to begin something new (Arendt 1998, 185–86).

11. For Arendt's appropriation of Kant's reflective judgment, see her lectures on Kant (Arendt 1989). For Beauvoir and reflective judgment, see Moynagh 2006.

12. In contrast to "macrohistories" that focus on "great statesmen" or explain grand events. As Lynn R. Wilkinson writes in an essay on Isak Dinesen's influence on Arendt, she—as well as Beauvoir, we must add—"celebrate[s] writers and intellectuals rather than warriors" (Wilkinson 2004, 96).

13. Actually authored by Dolmancé.

14. We must note that, for Sade, agency is in fact available to all, women as well as men. Even the libertine's victims can attempt to escape, fight back, or embrace debauchery (Beauvoir 2012, 88). In fact, the victim's revolt pushes the libertine to redouble his torturous efforts *and* to respect the active spirit of the victim.

15. Beauvoir writes, "Revolt itself is a luxury that requires culture, leisure, and a certain distance from the necessities of existence, and although Sade's protagonists pay for their revolt with their lives, at least he had first endowed their lives with a sense of value; whereas for the vast majority of men revolt coincides with imbecilic suicide" (Beauvoir 2012, 93).

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