

# “White Women Elected Trump”: Feminism in ‘Dark Times,’ Its Present and Future

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**Abstract:** Women-centred social movements are currently undergoing a period of intense self-reflection and -criticism following the election of Donald J. Trump as President, and in the context of the large degree of support he received from white women. This paper analyses the event of the ‘women’s marches’ that took place globally the day following Trump’s presidential inauguration for its significance for the present and future of feminism. The consequence of the marches has been debated both by participants and non-participants, due to the broad range of issues, interests, and demands present at the events. While there was a diversity of participants in the marches, a common criticism from non-participants was that the march was insufficiently political in its goals and manifestation, too novice and too disparate to constitute real political action. This paper responds to this concern and its implications by staging an exchange between Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière, in order to clarify the possibilities of movements such as the marches for the future of feminism.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, Feminism, Political theory, Women’s Marches

The place for the working out of difference is not the “self” or the culture of a group. It is the *topos* of an argument. And the place for such an argument is an interval. The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being *together* to the extent that we are *in between*—between names, identities, cultures and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Feminism is arguably experiencing something of a renewal currently, just as—and perhaps even because—this historical moment is also so dark for women. For, if feminism is once again becoming mainstream acceptable, this event has been accompanied (even galvanised) by an aggressive resurgence of patriarchal control over women’s reproductive and economic lives, as well as an alarming insouciance regarding the patent sexism of elite political figures. Donald J. Trump was seemingly assured of electoral defeat after a recorded conversation revealed his casual attitude towards (and participation in) sexual assault of women who cross his path.<sup>2</sup> Yet Republican voters held their noses and voted him into the White House anyway, so that the heralded inevitability of a first woman president did not come to pass. Weeks after Trump’s inauguration, the state of Arkansas passed a law that will allow rapists to sue doctors who abort the issue of their crime, and even to prevent a termination from taking place.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, it has been reported that President Trump’s office is preparing an executive order declaring “that premarital sex is wrong, that marriage ‘is or should be recognised’ as between a man and a woman, that life begins at conception and that the words ‘male and female’ refer to ‘immutable biological sex’ assigned at birth.”<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, Trump has been attempting to push through radical orders to stop immigration from predominantly Muslim nations, and has openly been engaged in an attempt to suppress voting rights of African Americans under the guise of tackling voter fraud. Before the election Trump had encouraged supporters to police predominantly black and Latinx polling districts against voter fraud (that is, to engage in voter intimidation). It is not only the rights of women that are under attack, therefore. Rather, anyone who is not male, white, and arguably also wealthy, stands to lose through the Trump administration’s agenda.

It is, in this context, revealing that 53% of white women voters elected Trump.<sup>5</sup> When choosing which aspects of their experience and which elements of their identities mattered most when casting a vote, more than half of white women found themselves indifferent to Trump’s insults against women, as well as his running mate Mike Pence’s staunchly anti-reproductive rights agenda. Moreover, not only did their being-woman not matter in this context, but women who voted for Trump also chose not to relate to the non-white and non-Christian women and men with most reason to fear what America would become under

Trump's foreshadowed policies. In essence, these women chose to *embrace their whiteness* at the ballot box, revealing the extent to which—at least in their own minds—race trumps (so to speak) gender in the contemporary ledger of privilege. This cleavage between white and non-white women betrayed the urgency of other dimensions of systemic injustice: where some women fail so spectacularly to enact solidarity with women under attack on multiple strata, 'womanhood' cannot be seen to unify women under one identity. As black feminists such as Patricia Hill-Collins, Audre Lorde, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and bell hooks have argued well, liberation for white women has been bought at the expense of their non-white sisters.<sup>6</sup>

Is it not curious, then, that the first and most vivid demonstration of resistance against Trump's presidency came in the form of a "women's march"? On the day after the inauguration the "women's march" attracted around 500,000 women to Washington, and hundreds of thousands of women across the U.S. and the world, to protest against the vision of politics promoted by his presidency. Some commentators have sneeringly disparaged the march as apolitical, as disparate to the extent that there was no clear objective and no sense of a precise outcome for the action, and as attractive only to non-activists without commitment to ongoing protest. As is beginning to be documented, the genesis of that event itself reflected a degree of inexperience and naivety regarding organising a movement, and the privilege of white feminists, as insensitivities regarding inclusion and activism had to be addressed and negotiated.<sup>7</sup> A controversy of the march involved the presence there of signage declaring the fact that "white women voted for Trump," as many white marchers were confused and affronted by this acknowledgement, which placed them in the ambivalent situation of being implicated in Trump's victory by dint of their skin colour and the privilege it affords.

Yet eclectic and at times divided as it was, the success of that action was largely due to its *inclusiveness*: of men, but also of women from an array of backgrounds and orientations to feminism. The march I attended in Sydney was addressed by a Muslim human rights lawyer and refugee (Mariam Veiszadeh), a white media commentator (Jane Caro), a young Queer activist, and *twice* by Aboriginal elder Jenny Munro, who rousingly called for a treaty with First Nations people who had never ceded sovereignty over the land that provided the *topos* for our demonstration.<sup>8</sup> These inclusions signalled that something had been learned, as the theme of intersectionality was foregrounded even as we were told the "F" word wasn't to be mentioned.<sup>9</sup> The banner under which this insurrection gathered was, nonetheless, "women"; and there was a sense that through this diverse and perhaps "fractious" undertaking a new direction for feminism was belatedly fomenting as an inclusive movement. The challenge that

brought people together under this aegis of a feminism-that-dare-not-speak-its-name also brought to light the limits of individualistic empowerment. The space of 'feminism' is being 'occupied' by those whom it had previously excluded, those whose status as 'not counted' had ensured a comfortable solidarity between white middle-class women.

This paper aims to explore further this event of 'feminism' as including members whom it had previously not counted as such, through the thought of the French (male) political philosopher Jacques Rancière—and particularly through his encounter with Hannah Arendt, to whose book *Men in Dark Times* this essay makes titular reference. In that book, Arendt defines 'darkness' as the condition in which humanity finds itself wherein the *political* realm—the "space of appearance in which [men] [*sic.*] can show in deed and word... who they are and what they can do"<sup>10</sup>—has been eclipsed by what she calls 'the social.' The 'dark times' to which Arendt refers, then, do not signify the reign of totalitarianism as much as a conception of democracy that retreats into the administration of bodies rather than the public formulation of new world-defining ideas and values. In his essay "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?," Rancière challenges Arendt's demarcation of the political by drawing on the example of feminism as a new opening of politics that would be excluded as merely private according to Arendt's formulation of the political.<sup>11</sup> Rancière here in fact *defines* the political using the model of feminism, demonstrating not only feminism's relevance but even its *centrality* to politics, precisely in virtue of its status of *not* belonging to a philosophical conception of 'the political.' In addressing the question of the future of feminism at a time when the model of feminism exemplified by Hillary Clinton would now seem painfully irrelevant, I would like to draw on Rancière's redefinition of the political to theorise the current demands for inclusion of movements that have been marginalised by mainstream (liberal) feminism—and which promise, moreover, to revitalise feminism as a political movement.

## **I. Arendt's Private/Public Distinction and Some Feminist Responses to her Thought**

Hannah Arendt cuts a controversial figure within political philosophy, particularly among feminist readers of her work. A philosopher who worked as a journalist, and so expanded her reception well beyond the academy, Arendt is one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. Her influence has been felt again in recent years in light of her emphasis on how we understand freedom and responsibility, and in the context of the rise again of racist political movements alongside a rapid global increase in numbers of displaced persons.

As a great woman thinker, however, Arendt was famously disparaging of feminism and women who “give orders.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, her critique of the modern liberal conception of freedom—and what she viewed as its perversion from Antiquity—led her to be especially critical of feminist attempts to reappraise the ‘private’ realm as political. This judgment is part of a much broader program for Arendt, who criticised modern philosophy’s retreat to the private sphere as the proper site of the free expression of individuality. According to Arendt, such retreat suggests a reversal of value from the situation of politics’ birthplace in ancient Greece. Importantly, Athenian activities within the private sphere or household (*oikia*) related to the “maintenance of life,” and so to *necessity* as opposed to freedom.

To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in so far as he had the power to *leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals*.<sup>13</sup>

The maintenance of this structure in effect restricts political participation to household heads, or patriarchs. For Arendt, the crucial role the private realm—as un-free—plays for the *polis* is as the place in which whatever should not be shown can remain hidden.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the household is a protective space, enabling the care of (men’s) bodies so that they may reveal themselves in the public (political) sphere as citizens. It is then, for Arendt, an abject space, or perhaps more precisely, a realm of indecency: privacy is required in order that the citizen may exercise control over what is seen and what is not seen; what comes under consideration of ‘his’ peers as an aspect of ‘his’ appearing and what remains hidden for the sake of decorum. That philosophers in modernity began to characterise the private sphere as a space of *freedom* (the free practice of religion, for instance) amounted to a category error for Arendt, effectively politicising what should remain apolitical, and crowding out the place of a genuine politics through which humanity would be allowed to come to fruition. The practice of religion and other ‘private’ concerns should be outside the purview of the state not because that would ensure their freedom, for Arendt. Rather, they should exist beyond the state’s limits simply because they are of no interest to it: they do not pertain to the realm of freedom (politics) at all.

Some of the conclusions Arendt draws from this commitment to the public sphere as the authentic space for the unfolding of freedom are decidedly unpalatable. Particularly, she dismisses the political assertions of women and

workers as corrosive of the human capacity for freedom, precisely because they bring into the political realm of appearances that which ought to remain hidden. For instance, she writes:

[F]rom the beginning of history to our own time [the private sphere] has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy, all things connected with the necessity of the life process itself, which prior to the modern age comprehended all activities serving the subsistence of the individual and the survival of the species. Hidden away were the laborers who “with their bodies minister to the [bodily] needs of life,” and the women who with their bodies guarantee the physical survival of the species. Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else’s property but because their life was “laborious,” devoted to bodily functions.<sup>15</sup>

Feminism’s creed that the ‘personal is political’ is thus not only misguided, from Arendt’s perspective: it is also distasteful, and moreover, undermines the very possibility of political action. It contaminates the political sphere by bringing darkness (understood as what *ought* to remain hidden) into a discursive field that would then take the place of politics.

There have been noteworthy attempts to salvage Arendt’s philosophy to theorise feminist politics despite this antagonistic regard for feminism. For instance, Maria Markus has argued that Arendt’s account of figures such as Rahel Varnhagen and Rosa Luxemburg (as well as Franz Kafka, Heinrich Heine, and Walter Benjamin) as “pariah” allows Arendt to open to a possibility of feminism, or at least to the inclusion in the political sphere of outsiders. Arendt opposes the pariah to the “parvenu,” the latter being one who abjures his or her own outsider status in order to “pass” as one of the majority. The pariah, by contrast, is faithful to her or his uniqueness or rebel status. Markus writes,

To be a rebel and to be isolated were two characteristics common to almost all ‘conscious pariah’ described by Arendt. Neither was chosen as such but occurred as a consequence of a much more basic choice of remaining what one was.<sup>16</sup>

A principal aspect of Arendt’s high estimation of Rosa Luxemburg is her insistence on remaining a Jew and a woman, notwithstanding the significant personal costs of refusing to downplay these elements of her being. In claiming the right to be who she was, Luxemburg thus disclosed her humanity to others

within the appropriate sphere of political action, in solidarity with other pariah—others whose existence was difficult in that historical moment. The 'being woman' and 'being Jew' disclosed through this gesture does not, therefore, cling to the social or private aspects of being: they are, rather released from an 'obscene' (or hidden) register of existence, transformed through this affirmation from being merely passive attributes. In such a context of rebellion, these otherwise 'given' states are elevated to 'activity' (properly belonging to freedom and politics).

I will return to the significance of pariah in relation to solidarity in the conclusion to this paper. Seyla Benhabib takes up a second and related aspect of Arendt's philosophy that may be salvaged to theorise feminism. While critical of Arendt's emphasis in much of her work on the concept of public space as a sphere that implicitly excludes women due to their historical relegation to the private sphere of necessity, Benhabib highlights a particular rendering of public space given by Arendt: that is, as 'associational,' wherein "men [*sic*] act together in concert" (as opposed to 'agonistic,' which is a competitive space for recognition and the display of greatness).<sup>17</sup> Association is the aspect of public space through which otherwise excluded or isolated individuals come together in mutual struggle toward a common end, regardless of their differences. Through this gesture of solidarity, individuals emerge out of their privacy to appear in public in their relatedness to others, to exercise freedom together. Such appearances are 'public' in virtue of having enacted a space of freedom, rather than in virtue of having taken place in a particular institutional context or according to an already determined structure delimiting who gets to speak where. Arguably, then, this associational conception of publicity is at least not hostile to women's (and labourers') participation in the manner that agonistic publicity conceivably is. Benhabib locates the discussion of associational publicity as both a site of promise for feminist theory, and as a site of tension within Arendt's own political theory, where certain of her exclusions of instances of activism from the public sphere are inattentive to their associational (and thus political) character.

I have discussed elsewhere Arendt's significant blind spot regarding actions leading to the desegregation of Schools in Little Rock Arkansas—actions that she had characterised as non-political, and even as endangering the political by imposing the social into the political sphere.<sup>18</sup> Benhabib also notes the remarkable misjudgment in Arendt's reading of "the demands of the Black parents, upheld by the US Supreme Court, to have their children admitted into previously all-white schools" as akin to "the desire of the social parvenu to gain recognition in a society that did not care to admit her."<sup>19</sup> In the first instance, Arendt fails to comprehend here the very real material implications of denial

of access to quality education, which does not amount to a mere desire for recognition. But secondly and more fundamentally, Benhabib suggests that Arendt's difficulty in coming to terms with pivotal instances of *political* activism such as this is due to what she calls her "phenomenological essentialism," meaning

[Arendt's] belief that each type of human activity has its proper 'place' in the world, and that this place is the only authentic space in which this kind of activity can truly unfold.<sup>20</sup>

Benhabib argues that this rigidity is inconsistent with Arendt's associative conception of freedom: a conception that provides a basis within her philosophy to theorise the kinds of feminist, worker, and civil rights movements she elsewhere explicitly disparages.

We will now turn to Rancière's critique of Arendt's political theory, his own concerns centering similarly on what Benhabib calls her "phenomenological essentialism." Rancière, however, introduces a rival conception of politics that further opens out possibilities for thinking the present and future of feminist action in the context of the women's marches.

## 2. Rancière on What Is and Is Not Politics

Jacques Rancière is broadly critical of the tendency of political philosophy to delimit in advance the scope of political action, as if such a gesture were itself politically neutral. For, the effect of this tendency is to exclude or render invisible whatever assertion of equality or litigation of a wrong does not accord to the given account of 'the political.' If theory takes it upon itself preemptively to declare what is political and what is not, this can only reinforce existing social inequalities. Philosophers will miss the revolution if they look only in the places they preordain it should be found. But more than this, philosophy becomes a servant of the elite when it fails to recognise *as political* expressions it relegates to another, non-political (even non-*human*) sphere of life; when it attempts to orchestrate a peace (or consensus) as the first condition of political community; or when it attempts to circumscribe and control the ways in which a collective may *legitimately* claim equality.

There are three ways in which political philosophy characteristically attempts to restrict the field of politics, according to Rancière, each of which responds to particular historical instances of the "scandal" of a collective assertion of a fundamental equality, by displacing and neutralising *real* politics and producing its simulacrum in theory. The first anti-democratic tendency of



political philosophy, “archipolitics,” originates with Plato, who attempted to enact a “complete realization of the *arkhê* [origin, or first principle of order] of community, total awareness, replacing the democratic configuration of politics with nothing left over.”<sup>21</sup> Rancière refers here to Plato’s overly prescriptive designation of all roles within the community (from philosopher-kings, to guardians, to artisans), according to a principle (*arkhê*) supposedly inherent to the community. The context to which Plato reacts is the emergence of a new and threatening variety of democracy in Athens through the inclusion of the *demos*; the freed slave who previously had had no part in the civic life of the *polis*, and who presses his equality by speaking in the name—synecdoche like—of the freedom others had taken for granted. For Plato, by contrast, in his imaginary society the *Republic*, everyone knows his or her correct place, according to a hierarchy of ‘parts’ supposed to mirror the structure of the well-ordered soul (appetitive, spiritual, and deliberative). “With nothing left over” refers us to political philosophy’s trait of failing to see what its system refuses. What Rancière calls “the part with no part” is the remainder that Plato’s philosophy both proscribes and necessitates: a remainder that, for Rancière, in fact *defines* politics as a dispute in which two opposing worlds (rationalities or ontologies) come to exist in the same space: when the first excludes that other, and this exclusion is brought to issue through the demand of the excluded class.

By attempting to designate all parts “with nothing left over,” then, Plato and other archipolitical philosophers effectively suppress the political, understood by Rancière as this disruptive assertion of equality. The truth the archipolitical philosopher obscures is that the political community in reality has no *arkhê*; rather, the ‘first principle’ of community, in so far as we might use such a phrase, is *politics*.

In the form of democracy, politics is already in place, without waiting for its theoretical underpinnings or its *arkhê*, without waiting for the proper beginning that will give birth to it as performance of its own principle. The *demos* is already there without its three features: the erecting of a sphere for the name of the people to appear; the unequal count of this people that is both whole and part at the same time; the paradoxical revelation of the dispute by part of the community that identifies with the whole in the very name of the wrong that makes it the other party. This observation of the fact of antecedence is transformed by ‘political philosophy’ into a diagnosis of inherent vice.<sup>22</sup>

Democracy’s inherent vice is that anyone from any quarter might emerge to

demand equality, and the appeal to a first cause or origin (*arkhê*) serves to bring ‘police’ (the appearance of order) back to the scene of politics. Notably, and perhaps surprisingly given her concern to theorise possibilities of resistance, Rancière views Arendt as falling into the category of archipolitical philosophy.<sup>23</sup> We will turn to Rancière’s critique of Arendt in this light shortly.

The second anti-democratic tendency of political philosophy Rancière identifies is ‘parapolitics,’ which ostensibly emerges as a rejoinder to archipolitics. This approach, exemplified and “invented” by Aristotle, converts the “theoretical paradox” of politics (as a “meeting of incommensurables”) and casts it as a “practical paradox of government”: that is, equality is a problem for which practical remedies are sought through a theorisation of political legitimacy.<sup>24</sup> While Plato excludes altogether the *demos* (or part that has no part) from his *conception* of the well-ordered city, Aristotle coopts the *demos*, according to Rancière, thus domesticating politics, or policing the dispute that defines politics. Aristotle achieves this policing most effectively through the regulation of what counts as “speech” (*logos*) and what is merely “voice” (*phônê*)—the latter being shared in common with non-human animals, where the former is uniquely human. While speech is language—ordered rationally and belonging to an ethical register that expresses the difference between right and wrong, good and evil—voice is disordered and can only register pleasure and pain. The distinction is nominally supposed only to designate a difference between human and non-human animals, yet also produces a hierarchical separation *within* humanity, according to different classes’ purported degree of participation in rationality or *logos*. In *The Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes those with the nature of slaves from those suited to rule in precisely this way.<sup>25</sup> In modernity, parapolitics is found in social contract theories (most paradigmatically in Hobbes) that attempt to locate the origin of politics as a variety of consensus, wherein citizens choose to limit their freedoms and even their equality in order to secure peace. Politics is thereby defined in terms of power and questions of legitimate force rather than equality. Politics as understood by Rancière as *dissensus* is ushered to the margins of the polis, as disorder and inherent danger: the “madness in the multitude,” or threat of sedition, against which philosophy must regulate.<sup>26</sup>

The third variety of political theory Rancière suggests neutralises genuine politics is metapolitics, exemplified by Marx. While Rancière is perhaps most sympathetic with Marxism—to the extent that it is an emancipatory and revolutionary politics based on conceptions of universal equality—Marxist philosophy nevertheless obscures politics by differentiating between authentic and so-called inauthentic forms of political action, with the claim that it can divine an underlying truth of politics in the social as class struggle. This gesture

then enables the Marxist to deem as illegitimate the false consciousness of those whose actions it fails to recognise as political. As Rancière puts this,

Metapolitics can seize on any phenomenon as a demonstration of the truth of its falseness. For the truth of falseness, Marx in his genius invented a key word that all modernity has adopted, at times even turning it against him. He called it *ideology*. Ideology is not just a new word for simulacrum or illusion. Ideology is the word that signals the completely new status of the true that metapolitics forges: the true as the truth of the false. ... It alternately allows the political appearance of the people to be reduced to the level of an illusion concealing the reality of conflict or, conversely, the names of the people and the manifestations of its dispute to be put down as outdated, holding up the emergence of common interests. Ideology is the term that links the production of politics to its evacuation, that designates the distance between words and things as the falseness in politics that can always be turned into the falseness of politics.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas from Marx’s metapolitical perspective this gap between truth and consciousness (or words and things... or man and citizen) is the problem or “scandal” of politics, for Rancière this internal division—or ‘dissensus’—is the site at which politics might emerge: that is, precisely where nothing (political) is expected to be. For Rancière, “[t]here is politics from the moment there exists the sphere of appearance of a subject, *the people*, whose particular attribute is to be different from itself, internally divided.”<sup>28</sup> The part that has no part, that does not quite coincide with itself or what it is supposed to be, is the subject of politics in this regard. And in so far as metapolitics designates this non-coincident subject as a false consciousness, it not only misses but even abjures the political moment.

We might note here that this metapolitical position is represented by objections that the women’s marches’ purpose was not clearly articulated or unified. The judgment behind this criticism is that the marchers were not sufficiently conscious of what brought them together, and that their actions did not adequately reveal or materialise an underlying social truth. Rancière’s critique of identity politics and his account of subjectivisation help to elucidate the political that such a deployment of metapolitics misses, particularly where ‘consciousness’ becomes a marker of one’s being as political. Identity politics has predominated feminist movements since the late 1960s, to the extent that a common experience of oppression shared by all women within patriarchy, and in virtue of their womanhood, has been seen to form a conceptual ground

for feminism. There has been much critique of this invocation of a common experience of oppression, particularly on the part of black and lesbian feminists for whom womanhood is neither the limit nor even the predominant determinant of their oppression. The numerous differences between women's experiences together with the failure of white and middle class women to take up other causes (such as the deaths of black men at the hands of police) historically have produced hierarchies within feminism, and have alienated many women from the movement. Audre Lorde illustrates the tensions brought out through identity feminism well in an essay published in 1984,

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?<sup>29</sup>

This gesture toward the need for intersectionality implicitly criticises the identity politics notion that all women experience oppression in more or less the same way. Those whose primary understanding of disadvantage is restricted to their being a woman under patriarchy most likely have not been discriminated against in virtue of being black, poor, disabled, or queer. The extent to which a woman is able to claim that sexism is the most fundamental form of oppression may also be an index of her relative privilege. And conversely, if a slim majority of white women voted for Trump, then it would seem that the most privileged women do not feel sexist oppression to be especially fundamental in any case.

Where the most privileged women abandon feminism the identification as "woman" perhaps loses its political currency. Rancière interprets the focus on 'identity' in terms of political philosophy's tendency to depoliticise whatever does not fit its account (or counting) of the political, and so arguably we may take lessons on the depoliticisation of feminism from this critical perspective. Particularly, for Rancière identity politics accedes to the archipolitical assignment of roles according to social hierarchy. By these lights it is not merely accidental that hierarchies and exclusions take place within the context of a feminism conceptualised according to identity politics. Just as Audre Lorde experienced her inclusion in the conference to which she addressed "The Master's House" as tokenistic, "fixing" feminism cannot only be a matter of inviting more women of non-white, non-affluent backgrounds into community.

Although this may be a beginning, hierarchy is inherent to the logic of identity politics feminism in so far as it operates as an *archipolitical* discourse. In so far as feminism operates *metapolitically* it is again characterised by hierarchy—between a vanguard of knowers and the dupes whom they must lead to liberation, for instance.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in its *parapolitical* register, feminist politics may silence certain speech as apolitical or beneath political concern: for instance, by excluding the accounts of self provided by sex workers or trans women.<sup>31</sup> Beyond a threshold of inclusion (say 30%) there may be real change, but this would be due to a consequent disruption of the fundamental logic of the community rather than the scope of an identity category simply having been expanded. The rationale will have shifted from identities, roles, and hierarchies of oppression, to a fundamental *equality* between diverse parts.

In this context, for Rancière *de*-identification becomes a political strategy where the subject finds itself in the gap *between* identities or imperatives: that is, precisely where it is ‘un-conscious,’ or cannot yet articulate the specific nature of its belonging to a group because that nature is still in the process of materialising. Politics for Rancière takes place *through the manifestation of an equality*, rather than in advance of that action. Subjective *de*-identification, then, expresses its equality through its equal capacity for (political) speech, which must be *demonstrated* rather than already authorised. Accordingly, we may see the lack of discernable unified purpose that was charged toward the women’s marches as the very factor that engendered their political force: as the *topos* of a “subjectivization in an argumentative plot.”<sup>32</sup> As an equivocation between identities, or a failure to coincide with a putatively essential phenomenological experience, the subject of politics emerges precisely where it is not expected, to claim an equality it does not yet own. If the women’s marches promise to refashion feminism, it is *because* of their lack of cohesion. They were visible—even spectacular—because of their diversity; because they brought together women in argument (or dissensus) with one another as well as with Trump.

We will return to reflect on the political import of the women’s marches in the conclusion. Let’s turn now to Rancière’s critique of Arendt, whose misreading of politics further elucidates feminism’s importance for politics more broadly, as the emergence of the part with no part.

### 3. Rancière’s Critique of Arendt

Although he addresses the limitations of Arendt’s account of politics throughout his writings, Rancière’s most focused critique appears in ‘Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?’ Here he argues his characterisation of her as an archipolitical thinker in relation to her account of the apparent *aporia* opened by the situation

of displaced—or stateless—persons in Europe. Appropriately for our purposes, Rancière draws on the eighteenth century feminist figure Olympe de Gouges, as exemplar of the political moment that Arendt would exclude, in order to flesh out his critique of her philosophy. Feminism's *cri de coeur* that 'the personal is political' can be seen as disruptive of 'police,' or the order that archipolitics attributes to the community, in so far as it insists that what conventionally belongs to privacy (and so should remain hidden) is *the* most pressing issue for public attention. As we saw in section one, Arendt's noted distaste for feminism may be attributed to her sense that the distinction between "public" and "private" spheres ought to be maintained, and that its collapse signals a devaluation of politics understood as freedom.

The *aporia* opened by the existence refugees, according to Arendt, bears upon the status of human rights supposed to belong to all by virtue of their humanity, but which, in practice, accrue only to citizens in virtue of their protection by a state or national community. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt argues that displaced persons give the lie to human rights to the extent that they are shown to have no purchase on the obligations of others. The rights that are said to be theirs because they are human are withheld in so far as they have no national community to legislate and enforce those rights. As Rancière summarises her position,

Arendt found [in the figure of the refugee] the "body" fitting the abstractedness of the rights and she stated the paradox as follows: the Rights of Man are the rights of those who are only human beings, who have no more property left than the property of being human. Put another way, they are the rights of those who have no rights, the mere derision of right.<sup>33</sup>

Rancière picks up a note of disgust in Arendt's apprehension of the refugee, as one who is deprived of a public and at the mercy of their "givenness" or necessity—that is, who is purely private. This disgust is most patent, according to Rancière, where Arendt writes: "Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed, but that *nobody wants to oppress them*."<sup>34</sup> This "contemptuous tone" towards those whom, Arendt suggests, "were guilty of not even being able to be oppressed, not even worthy of being oppressed,"<sup>35</sup> Rancière attributes to Arendt's constitution as an archipolitical philosopher, upon encountering the quotient of humanity that does not fit her schema: or in Rancière's language, "the part that has no part."

As Rancière demonstrates, Arendt's aporetic construction of the refugee

assumes that a place must already have been made for them within the community before they may be afforded respect as persons capable of political action (rather than merely nutritive behaviors). Arendt presents the refugee as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* to human rights, and specifically the notion that a politically recognisable human could exist in an abstract sense, external to the community that provides the occasion for political action. While, to be fair, Arendt's characterisation of the public sphere brings insight to the kind of intersubjectivity that supports action, her account leaves those whom the state does not recognise in a condition of abandonment. In extremis, her philosophy verges into the messianic drifts of a Giorgio Agamben, for whom all are abandoned impassively to await the call of a radically heterodox (miraculous) rupture to the order from without. Rancière's solution to Arendt's quandary constitutes a reversal of her formulation that would place agency in the hands of the part with no part, the unaccounted for. He rewrites her paradoxical construction that human rights are "the rights of those who have no rights," as the equally paradoxical:

the Rights of Man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not.<sup>36</sup>

We may understand this sentence in terms of our earlier discussion of de-identification, as an emergence of the political in the interstices of identities and positions. De-identification, and the process of *subjectivisation* that attends it, takes place where the emergent subject rejects the role given to it as rightless, or as outside the bounds of community: in other words, as uncounted. The "rights of man," in this light, are not the scraps that remain after the citizen has taken his portion (and therefore worthless, as Arendt would have it), just as it is not simply a matter of the citizen offering the rightless a place at the table. Rather, Rancière's formulation outlines how the uncounted demands to be counted, thus demonstrating their *right* to a place at the table. In enacting this formula, the "part with no part" demonstrates that the paradox belongs to the community, by refusing to play the part of paradox themselves. They demonstrate that a right to appear as political cannot be portioned out in advance, and so reject their role outside the sphere of politics. Yet, at stake here is not only the inclusion of the rightless, but moreover, the disordering of the community. For by demanding the rights they have not been given, the part with no part *exercises* a right the social order intends they should not have—indeed, the deprivation of which ensures social order (or police). The having of a right is thereby performative, and through the demonstration of an equality one is not supposed to own, one emerges as a subject of right. In the case of the stateless,

the insistence that ‘I am human’—that is, the claim to an identity that all others take for granted, and so is barely an identity at all (as with the claim to freedom of the *demos*)—reconfigures the apportionment of rights and privileges, because it shows that apportionment to be without an intrinsic principle, ground, or *arkhê*.

While the refugee is the archetypal ‘part with no part’ for Arendt, where Rancière elaborates his own conception of politics at the border of the community, he takes as his exemplar Olympe de Gouges. A revolutionary and feminist during the French Revolution, de Gouges took up with the *fraternité* that would exclude her the question of why a woman, if she is “entitled to go to the scaffold,” should not also be “entitled to go to the assembly.”<sup>37</sup> By holding the revolutionaries to the very ideals through which they claimed to found a new political community—that all are born equal—de Gouges demonstrated at once her equality to them as a woman, and the fact that their own conception of social order was based upon a miscount (i.e., that it could not include women). Moreover, gesturing back again to Arendt, Rancière shows that this miscount upon which the community is founded is precisely the division between ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres that Arendt defends so tenaciously.

[Women] allegedly belonged to private, domestic life. And the common good of the community had to be kept apart from the activities, feelings, and interests of private life. Olympe de Gouges’s argumentation precisely showed that the border separating bare life and political life could not be so clearly drawn. There was at least one point where “bare life” proved to be “political”: there were women sentenced to death, as enemies of the revolution. If they could lose their “bare life” out of a public judgment based on political reasons, this meant that even their bare life—their life doomed to death—was political. If, under the guillotine, they were as equal, so to speak, “as men,” they had the right to the whole of equality, including equal participation in political life.<sup>38</sup>

At stake for politics is precisely this border between the lives that are counted and those that are not. And the political subject is, for Rancière, this “capacity for staging ... scenes of dissensus” such as de Gouges’s challenge to her equals: if you would kill me because my existence matters politically, then why not also let me vote?<sup>39</sup>

It is significant that for Rancière a woman exemplifies this process of subjectivisation: of the negotiation of the gap between ‘man’ (bare life) and ‘citizen’ (political life). Throughout the history of western thought, women have



defined the boundary between 'the political' and what is excluded from it—not only as the excluded remainder, but they have also been charged with the maintenance of that division. Women's inclusion in political life continues to be felt as a scandal, and the propriety of the boundary between the domicile and public life is policed rigorously through the shaming of women who choose a public life (Julia Gillard, Hillary Clinton), the legislation of health care (particularly access to contraception and abortion), and the restriction of public funding to women's shelters, domestic violence programs, and the family court. Standing at the boundary between public and private spheres (or political and bare life, or freedom and necessity), women are political *par excellence*, according to Rancière's conception of the political as a capacity for disruption or dissensus through which the question of 'what is political and what is not' remains ever-present.

#### 4. Conclusion and Détente

If 'woman' operates thus as the figure at the border of politics, then this goes some way to explaining why the women's marches were able to serve to rally together such diverse subjectivities, as a symbol of resistance on the morning after Trump's presidential inauguration. I would argue that the women's march was 'successful'—and precisely was *not* a throwback to a past era of feminism—because it did *not* represent an instance of inclusion of diverse women by the grace of white, privileged women, and according to a conception of a shared experience of womanhood as oppression under patriarchy. Rather, if we were instead to understand the women's marches according to Rancière's account of 'woman' at the border that determines politics, then the symbol of 'woman' would not necessarily represent an *identity* that bids interpellation (and subjection). Instead, 'woman' might stand in for a moment of de-identification: the subjective moment of each participant, between exclusion and inclusion, 'man' and 'citizen,' personal and political. 'Woman' in this case would provide an image through which subjects of politics may stage a dissensus, disrupting the order of what may be seen (public) and what is supposed to remain hidden (private). The knitting and crocheting of "pussy hats" that became a global feature of the marches is one demonstration of this insistence that what was excluded from politics can also be central to it: this most paradigmatically feminine practice (which, incidentally, Freud likened to the fabrication of pudenda)<sup>40</sup> became a political activity through this staging.

Finally, and in a gesture of a détente with Arendt, we might also deploy the figure of the pariah to think through the specific mode of solidarity that the women's marches enacted. In this light, we can further understand the

marches not as a collection of women identifying with a hegemonic experience of womanhood. Rather, with Arendt, we can comprehend solidarity as an act of fidelity to one's difference, and even an elevation of the private and 'hidden' aspects of experience, to render them public and fashion with them one's own freedom. This would also constitute what Rancière describes as a redistribution of the sensible, wherein at the site of the inauguration, "they put together the world where those rights are valid and the world where they are not. They put together a relation of inclusion and a relation of exclusion."<sup>41</sup>

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- 1 Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification and Subjectivization," *October* 61 "The Identity in Question" (Summer, 1992): 62.
  - 2 See, for instance, Ben Mathis-Lilly, "Trump Was Recorded in 2005 Bragging About Grabbing Women 'by the Pussy'," *Slate Magazine*. 7 October 2016: [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2016/10/07/donald\\_trump\\_2005\\_tape\\_i\\_grab\\_women\\_by\\_the\\_pussy.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2016/10/07/donald_trump_2005_tape_i_grab_women_by_the_pussy.html) (Last accessed 10 Feb. 17).
  - 3 General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, Act 45 - the *Unborn Child Protection From Dismemberment Abortion Act*: <https://www.billtrack50.com/BillDetail/755370> (Accessed 6 Feb. 17). The text that leads to this implication that a rapist may prevent the abortion is where it specifies the party as "[a] person who is the spouse, parent, or legal guardian of the woman who receives or attempted to receive a dismemberment abortion." "Dismemberment abortion" refers to termination that occurs in the second trimester, when it is more likely that a child or wife of a rapist would delay their search for an abortion, due to trauma and confusion. See also Christina Cauterucci, "Arkansas Law Will Let Husbands Sue to Prevent Wives From Getting Certain Abortions." *Slate Magazine*. 3 February 2017: [http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2017/02/03/arkansas\\_law\\_will\\_let\\_husbands\\_sue\\_to\\_prevent\\_wives\\_from\\_getting\\_certain.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2017/02/03/arkansas_law_will_let_husbands_sue_to_prevent_wives_from_getting_certain.html) (Accessed 6 Feb. 17).
  - 4 See Jon Sharman, "Donald Trump reportedly planning executive order declaring pre-marital sex, same-sex marriage and abortion to be wrong." *Independent*. Thursday 2 February 2017: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-executive-order-christian-pre-marital-sex-same-sex-marriage-abortion-wrong-religious-a7558691.html> (Accessed 6 Feb. 17).
  - 5 94% of black women and 68% of Latinx women voted for Hillary Clinton. See Lois Beckett, Rory Carroll, Carmen Fishwick, Amber Jamieson and Sam Thielman, "The real 'shy Trump' vote - how 53% of white women pushed him to victory," *The Guardian*. 10 November 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/us>

[news/2016/nov/10/white-women-donald-trump-victory](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/19/us/politics/white-women-donald-trump-victory) (Accessed 10 Feb. 17); and Rhon Manigault-Bryant, “An Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists,” *Black Perspectives*. 19 November 2016: <http://www.aaihs.org/an-open-letter-to-white-liberal-feminists> (Last accessed 10 Feb. 17).

- 6 See Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000); and bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989); and *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (Cambridge, Ma.: The South End Press Collective, 2007).
- 7 See Amanda Hess, “How a Fractious Women’s Movement Came to Lead the Left,” *The New York Times Magazine*. 7 February 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/magazine/how-a-fractious-womens-movement-came-to-lead-the-left.html> (Last accessed 10 February 2017).
- 8 See “Women’s March on Sydney” Facebook Event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1290132247726710/> (last accessed 11 February 2017).
- 9 Hess’s article suggests that this tendency of the Sydney Women’s March was shared at other sites internationally.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1968), viii.
- 11 Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 297-310.
- 12 See Arendt’s 1964 interview with the German journalist Gunter Gaus on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/dsolmQfVsO4> (last accessed 16 Feb. 17).
- 13 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 32. Emphasis added.
- 14 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 72.
- 15 Arendt, *Human Condition*, 72.
- 16 Maria Markus, “The ‘Anti-Feminism’ of Hannah Arendt,” *Thesis Eleven* 17 (1987), 80.
- 17 Arendt 1968, 4; quoted in Seyla Benhabib, “Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt’s

Concept of Public Space,” *History of the Human Sciences* 6 no. 2 (1993), 102.

18 See my...

19 Benhabib, “Feminist Theory,” 104.

20 Benhabib “Feminist Theory,” 104; referencing Arendt, *Human Condition*, 73ff.

21 Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 65.

22 Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 62.

23 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 299.

24 Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 73.

25 Aristotle makes the distinction between speech and voice in *The Politics* Book I, ii, 1253a7, and then in Book I, v proceeds to define the nature of slavery in those terms. See Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 21-22 and 26.

26 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, VIII (Adelaide: ebooks@adelaide): <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hobbes/thomas/h68l/chapter8.html>

27 Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 85-86.

28 Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 87.

29 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

30 See, for instance, Rancière’s criticism of Althusser in Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Continuum, 2011).

31 This position may also be classified as metapolitical, however, in that it ascribes false consciousness to women who classify their sex work as industrial rather than “recognising” the underlying truth of prostitution as institutionalised rape. For an instance of this kind of metapolitical discourse of exclusionary identity politics, see Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014) and *The Idea of Prostitution* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1997 (reprinted in 2008)).

32 Rancière, “Politics, Identification and Subjectivization,” 60.

33 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 298. Rancière refers to Hannah Arendt, *The*

*Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 297-98.

- 34 Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 293; quoted in Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 299. Emphasis added.
- 35 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 299.
- 36 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 302. For an excellent account of Rancière’s critique of Arendt see Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière’s Critique of Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 10, no. 1 (2011), 22-45.
- 37 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 303.
- 38 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 303-304.
- 39 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 304.
- 40 “It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenceless.” (Sigmund Freud (1933), *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture 33: Femininity, Standard Edition, Vol. 22, Trans. and Ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953: 132))
- 41 Rancière, “Who Is the Subject,” 304.

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