

## Only a Romantic Would Call Her Daddy

*Hannah Arendt was an intellectual role model for Susan Sontag, yet she never spoke about her in great detail. Why?*

By Kai Sina

When it came to Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag was not sparing with strong words. In her acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2003, she described Arendt as »a model of seriousness, « in her diary she spoke of her as a decisive influence on her own »intellectual formation.« Sontag's body of work, however, reveals a rather conspicuous contradiction to these claims: in her essays, she rarely talked about her »model,« and when she did it was in a superficial manner. This comes as a surprise, given that Sontag had commented extensively on her European mentors – Albert Camus, Walter Benjamin, and E. M. Cioran, as well as Thomas Mann, W. G. Sebald, and Simone Weil, to name only a few. So why was she so tight-lipped about Hannah Arendt, of all people?

A close examination of the fairly extensive literature on the writer, who died in 2004, provides few insights into this question. Although Arendt's name is consistently referred to in major publications, they add nothing of substance to Sontag's own commentaries on the matter: According to Benjamin Moser's biography published in 2019, Arendt was a guiding example for Sontag, particularly as an intellectual and a woman. Apparently, Moser considered Sontag's reference to Arendt so plausible that he virtually dispensed with any further analysis. Instead, he cited anecdotes and details that added little substance to the claim: in 1963, Arendt had written a promotional text for Sontag's debut novel: *The Benefactor*, mentioning their affiliation with the authors and readers of *Partisan Review*, their mutual friend Mary McCarthy – and so on.

Perhaps the archive might offer more answers about Arendt's significance in terms of Sontag's intellectual biography than the published works. A glance at the catalogs suggest as much: Sontag's posthumous papers, [which are being kept at the University of California in Los Angeles](#), hold extensive materials, including numerous newspaper articles and several books, which in turn contain many handwritten annotations. It may be possible to infer from these sources what Sontag had noted about Arendt; what had particularly interested her in terms of her work and as a person – and perhaps it might even explain why there is such a peculiar disconnect between her insistent reference to Arendt and the glaring silence about her in her writings.

### **Jewess and Schlemihl**

Susan Sontag certainly had planned to write an essay on Hannah Arendt. Yet, when she was given the opportunity to comment on her role model in the *Partisan Review* in 1968, she rejected the offer. She also failed to write a treatise on Arendt that focused on questions of aesthetics. At least an estate document suggests as much: »For Arendt essay – passage on the beautiful in Ch. 5.« This comment was

tagged on a sheet of blue note paper with the campaign logo of the »International Women's Year 1975.« Sontag is here referring to the chapter: »Magic, Beauty, Folly« in Arendt's political biography of Rahel Varnhagen.

Other than that, there is scant evidence that would point to a concrete writing project. Instead, we find scattered markings within the various texts she had been reading, especially annotations and underlines in books and isolated notes that were mostly written in pencil. Without wishing to belabor these findings hermeneutically the question remains: What aspect of Arendt was Sontag focusing on?

First and foremost, there is the complex of Jewishness and anti-Semitism, which for Arendt was divided into historical and systemic aspects. In the study on Rahel Varnhagen, there are a great many underlines in the section: »Jewess and Schlemihl.« The female designation – »Jewess« in English – is crucial here. In the introduction to her book, Arendt wrote that she planned to deal with the »Woman problem« around 1800; that is the discrepancy between what men expected of women ›in general‹ and what women« – Rahel Varnhagen – »could give or wanted in their turn, was already established by the conditions of the era and represented a gap that virtually could not be closed.«

Throughout the entire book, from beginning to end, Sontag traces the biographer's path: What it had meant to live and work in Prussia as a Jewish intellectual born in 1771, what it meant to be different in both senses, that is, to draw a distinction between herself and a majority that was both male and non-Jewish. The question Arendt posed, which resonates with the current debate around intersectionality, was also highly relevant for Sontag. This impression is supported by a glance at the twelfth chapter: »Between Pariah and Parvenu,« which she not only underlined several times, but whose main points she also noted in the book's preface: »Pariah vs. parvenue (2 choices open to Jews).«

## **A Unique Phenomenon**

Sontag's study of Jewish history in the age of Romanticism also expressed her intense interest in German culture, which in her view – as she described in a short story about her youthful encounter with Thomas Mann in Pacific Palisades – was a deeply fractured one. Arendt's Varnhagen study, which was planned as a post-doctoral thesis, and which already had been written in the 1930s, was first published in England in 1957 (and only recently was published in a critical new edition), had caught Sontag's eye with a certain inevitability. The following sentence from the preface, which is not least a commentary on the publication of the book in light of the Shoah, clearly resonated with Sontag who had marked it with a double vertical line in the margin and underlined it as well:

*»German-speaking Jewry and its history is a thoroughly unique phenomenon, which has no equal even in the field of other Jewish assimilation history. To investigate the circumstances and the conditions of this phenomenon, which expressed itself, among other things, in an almost startling wealth of talents*

*and scientific and intellectual productivity, will be a historical task of the first order, which, however, can naturally be tackled only today, after the history of the German Jews has come to an end.*«

Against this background, it seems obvious that Sontag was focusing particularly on the first part of Arendt's major study on the *Elements and Origins of Totalitarian Rule*, which had spelled out the major conclusions of the Varnhagen study once again; and contained, among other things, the chapters: »Anti-Semitism as an Outrage to Common Sense;« »The Jews and the Nation-State;« and »The Jews and Society.« There are countless markings in these sections. But especially highlighted – with double underlines, hashtags, and marginal notes – are precisely those passages in which Arendt discussed the structural embedding of anti-Semitism in modern European societies and the socioeconomic causes of this process. It is worth repeating once more how thoroughly Sontag had scrutinized the comments about Germany: even the details mentioned only in footnotes – on the history of the Rothschild family, for example, or a remark in Wilhelm von Humboldt's diaries – which impelled her to reach for her pencil.

Susan Sontag's focus on Hannah Arendt mainly during the sixties and seventies is both selective and personal: selective, because she did not seem to perceive, or barely perceived, crucial aspects of Arendt's work and, above all, the total complex of political theory; and personal, because what seems to especially interest her about Arendt's person and writings, had to do with the fact that she, too, was a woman and a Jewish intellectual. Thus, she uncovers a transatlantic line of tradition in her reading that extended from Rahel Varnhagen to Hannah Arendt to herself.

Two things should be noted here: firstly, that Arendt's Varnhagen book has been described as a »dialogue with an elective relative« (Annette Vowinckel), that is, that Arendt had read Varnhagen in a similar, namely identificatory, reading mode similarly to how Sontag read Arendt; and secondly, that Sontag's Jewishness seemed to be fundamentally related to her reception of Arendt. At least, one of her companions suggested as much. In a statement to Benjamin Moser, film scholar Don Eric Levine claimed: »Susan didn't come on Jewish,« with the result that, »insofar as she was trying to come on Jewish, she was trying to come on as Hannah Arendt.«

## **Under the Sign of Saturn**

The traces in the archive expand the statement's frame of reference to include European and German Romanticism, while allowing us to draw conclusions about the present day. Indeed, if we assume that Sontag represented an »intellectual authority« for »every brainy queer of my generation,« [as artist Johanna Hedva commented in her review of Moser's biography in the \*White Review\*](#), »especially those born under the sign of Saturn, went through a phase where Susan Sontag was their daddy. She schooled you on everything: what to read, what to watch, who was important, and why you should know about it; what an intellectual authority was, how to perform authority well enough to become one; and, crucially, how to wear your hair.« Indeed only an archival view reveals the background of this emphatic

identification. Whoever calls Sontag »Daddy,« as for example Hedva does, in speaking for queer intellectuals of our day, simultaneously stands in the tradition of intellectual history from Hannah Arendt and Rahel Varnhagen which includes Romanticism as well.

Nevertheless, Sontag hid this relatedness behind the noncommittal designation of Arendt as a »model of seriousness.« Why? Possibly because this seriousness says something both about Arendt's intellectual disposition, and also about Sontag herself. Accordingly, it would be the seriousness of her own reading that made it impossible for her to comment in-depth and publicly on Arendt. Seen in this light, her reticence resulted from an inability to distance herself intellectually from Arendt, and as great as Sontag's inclination was to engage in idolatry (she once half-ironically referred to Thomas Mann as her »God«), she simultaneously had a deep aversion to anything that seemed like a confession. Accordingly, her reading of Arendt was not only serious, but far too serious to have enabled her to engage in a purely objective, possibly critical discussion.

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