

A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND POWER IN HANNAH ARENDT'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Justin-Anthony Ekene Anene
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
justinanene@yahoo.com; 07031835919

&

Kelechi Onyeka Ezeani
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
kelechiezeani@gmail.com; 08034276391
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Abstract

This study deals with the question of resolving the misuse of political power through violence as the last resort as advocated by Hannah Arendt. However, the resort to oppression and violence by governments that are without authentic power, as Arendt postulates, is certainly visible within contemporary conflict, but, the roots and causes of civil conflicts are arguably inadequately explained. Focusing on her essay On Violence, this study seeks to appraise these concepts and analyze the sharp distinction that Hannah Arendt draws between power and violence. Knowing how power and violence are frequently combined, Hannah Arendt argues that they are conceptually distinct and antithetical. The research problem is that they are interchangeable and therefore confusing in their use of some concepts like social force, authority and power as they feature in the discourse of social and political matters in her age. The method of analysis is employed to analyze and evaluate the contentious distinction between power and violence and harness such analysis and appraisal as a veritable critical perspective for understanding power and violence in our contemporary world.

Keywords: Violence, Power, Reform, Revolution and Civil Disobedience,

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt was a twentieth century political philosopher whose writings and thoughts discuss totalitarianism, revolution, the nature of freedom and the faculties of thought and judgment. In her books and numerous essays, she “grapples with the most crucial political events of our century and tries to grasp their meaning as well as their historical import, and shows how they affect our categories of moral and political judgment.”¹ The issue Arendt engages with most

frequently is “the nature of politics and the political life, as distinct from other domains of human activity.”² For Hannah Arendt, the aim of political power in every government is to enable men and women to live together, to promote happiness or to realize a classless society. Unfortunately, this aim is no longer realizable in our world as political events in the world demonstrate most unambiguously. Contemporary challenges like the arms race, nuclear development for weapons, the rise of violent actions exemplified in thuggery, riots, ethnic crises, assassination, kidnapping, terrorism diplomatic loggishness in matters of peace and conflict resolutions inform this study. This study is also inspired by the international power mongering of the first world nations which in turn leave other nations and peoples at the mercy of the first world, particularly in terms of the understanding of political power, which has now become tools of violence and arbitrary control of human being thus, denying them of their fundamental rights to life, freedom from fear and freedom from any form of inhuman treatments. The above problems and the quest to find a political theory to solve this problem are very timely because of the contemporary possibilities of conflicts amongst the leaders of civilized nations on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of the third world countries and the marginalized towards revolutions in which violence has been taken to be the norm of the society.³ For Akam, “the productions of weapons of mass destruction have rendered man powerless by serving as instruments of violence directly or indirectly.”⁴ Therefore, this research argues through Hannah Arendt’s notion of power and violence and strives to establish if power and violence are conceptually distinct and even antithetical and, thus, concludes according to Hannah Arendt, that violence can destroy power but cannot create it.⁵ Arendt’s body of works on political philosophy is complex and challenging to comprehend and interpret. Unlike political philosophers before her, Arendt’s writings are unconventional and do not represent any systematic political philosophy, (a philosophy in which a single central argument is expounded and expanded upon in subsequent works), but draws inspiration from notable philosophers like Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jasper, Fanon and the likes.⁶

As noted above, Hannah Arendt’s thought on political philosophy covers a wide range of discourse, but the focus of this research is on Arendt’s *On Violence*. This Arendt’s work *On Violence* was written in 1969 as a response to the events current at the time, particularly the worldwide student uprising, the African American civil rights movement in the United States of America, and the rising level of terrorism and other forms of violence both in Europe and America. According to Arendt,

These reflections are provoked by the events and debates of the last few years as seen against the background of the twentieth century, which has become indeed, as Lenin predicted, a century of wars and revolution, hence, a century of violence which is to be their common denomination. There is, however, another factor in the present situation which, though predicted by nobody, is of at least equal importance. The technical development of implement of violence has reached the point where no political goal could convincingly correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict.⁷

Since the publication of this book, it has enjoyed a good deal of attention and has made many valuable contributions in the topics of violence in politics particularly in carefully distinguishing between ‘power’ and ‘violence.’

Hannah Arendt in her book, *On Violence*, reproaches the traditional western political philosophy for reducing politics to power, thereby concealing power as the central political phenomenon. Arendt’s conception of power is an extension of her concept of action. She understands power in both the non-hierarchical and non-instrumental way as much distinct from domination as from violence.⁸ According to Arendt,

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. Power is the essence of government⁹

Following from this, she stresses the essential *relational* and *potential* character of power and thus shows the impossibility of human omnipotence.

By the essential relational and potential character of power, Arendt means that “power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather from any action that may follow.”¹⁰ She further makes an analysis of violent action as an instrumental, mute and solitary activity which can destroy, but never generate power and which

therefore can never be more than a poor substitute for acting together. However, the priority of power over violence is not absolute: sometimes power needs violence to maintain itself.

For Arendt, power is effectively a mandate for an actor to take action it is in effect the political capital that is fostered by democracy or popular support. For her, the states need power to be able to sustain violent actions and that the use of violence erodes this power. Violence for her is action taken to forcefully coerce support from a group. That is the reason she says that power and violence are antithetical (where one rules absolutely, the other is absent). For her, violence appears as the last resort where power is in jeopardy. This is because for her violence can destroy power and it is utterly incapable of creating it.¹¹ Violence for Arendt does not depend on number or opinion but on implements.¹² More than the above, she views violence as a force for reform or change which may lead to the situation where politically, loss of power tempts men to violence for power which is inevitably unproductive. Terror for her is used to describe the state of government completely supported by violence. Terror is not the same as violence; it is rather the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate but, on the contrary remains in full control.¹³

Relation Between Power And Violence In Arendt's Political Philosophy

Although Arendt admits that power and violence are actually not separated from each other in water-tight compartments; "...nothing ...is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form."¹⁴ Thus, 'no government, no matter how great its means of violence may be, can survive without a power base and thus the support or the consent of the people, or at least part of them.' She further states that 'even the totalitarian ruler, who rules through terror and torture, cannot survive without the support of his secret police and network of informants.'¹⁵ Thus, only robot soldiers who can totally eliminate the human factor would be able to undo the essential prevalence of power over violence. Even in revolutions, the outcome eventually seems to depend not in the means of violence themselves, but on the power(s) behind the violence. Usually, the government still in power will be superior in terms of the means of violence, but this prevalence will only be to its advantage as long as its power structure remains intact, i.e. 'as long as the army and police are prepared to obey its orders and to use their weapons.'¹⁶ If this is no longer the case, then the rebellion will not be put down and the weapons will change camps.

Be that as it may, Arendt states clearly that when violence and power in pure form oppose one another such as in the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the situation is completely different. In such a case, violence for her can indeed soundly destroy power. The substitution of violence for power is thus always an expression of a loss of power—only then can substitution become attractive and even if it brings victory and thus seems worthwhile, it is always repaid with a further loss of power.

It must be indicated here that Arendt recognizes violence as the only fitting answer in certain situations.¹⁷ That applies especially in the face of totalitarian evil—the concentration and extermination camps from our recent history—for which Arendt indeed uses the biblical word *skandala*,¹⁸ or Kant’s expression of radical evil. This evil for her is beyond measure and incomprehensible.

In conclusion, Arendt assumes that power needs violence at certain moments to maintain itself. This implies that power must also prepare itself for such moments and thus must have means of violence in reserve. Following from the above, she employs two different concepts of violence: on the one hand, a violence that comes to the assistance of power or to use the words that she has cited before the violence as a last resort to keep the power structure intact¹⁹ and, on the other hand, a violence that is its own goal (and thus disavows its character as a means) and places itself in the place of power and therefore destroys all power (even of those who use it).

Finally, she further states that one could add here that “the first violence can be justified in certain cases—without being legitimised and the second in principle never (and consider this as the reason why normal everyday language usually labels the second violence as senseless,” i.e. without direction; resulting in nothing).

Arendt’s reflections on violence were provoked by the events and debates of the last few years, as seen against the background of the twentieth century.²⁰ For her, the century has indeed become as Lenin predicted: a century of wars and revolutions; hence a century of that violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator.

Implications Of Arendt's Interpretation Of Power And Violence (Revolutionary Spirit In Politics)

In elaborating the difference between power and violence Arendt provides us with a critical perspective for thinking about our current political life. Although she departs from the tradition of thinking of power as “power over”²¹ she captures something quintessential about power and which we are in danger of forgetting: the way in which it can arise spontaneously when human beings act together, the way in which it can grow, the way in which it can become revolutionary. Also, Jürgen Habermas suggests that we call Arendt's notion of power that arises out of corporation “power with”, to contrast it with Max Weber's emphasis on “power over.” For Weber, power is the possibility of forcing one's own will on the behavior of others.

Furthermore, Arendt reminds us that as long as natality and the human capacity to act together are not obliterated, the tangible public freedom that is the expression of power can spring forth. Thus, Richard J. Bernstein notes that Arendt knows that in “real world” power and violence are rarely separated, but this is no reason to confuse these antithetical concepts.²²

By keeping power and violence distinct, we sharpen our critical understanding of this “real world.” This distinction of power from violence presents with tools to evaluate and draw implications for modern governments and modern peoples on the significance of civil obedience and consent. The “real world” that confronts us here is the reality of our contemporary problems of good governance. We have to decide whether and in what sense power can be distinguished from force to ascertain how the fact of using force according to law changes the quality of law itself and presents us with an entirely different picture of human relations.

The sharp conceptual distinction between violence and power is reasonable if we should consider the moral-ethical ideals asserted by Arendt in her theory of the political power. However, Arendt's critics have noted the contradistinction committed by her notion of *justified* violence. It is this form of violence that Arendt deems acceptable in her utopian vision of politics.

McGowan presents us with a thorough understanding of what form of violence that is acceptable in Arendt's political realm.²³ McGowan starts by agreeing that some conflicts do yield violence; these conflicts deal with matters of life and find realization in civil wars and the like. The second form of conflict that does not yield violence is the agonistic competition for distinction, while other potentially violent conflicts are exiled from politics.²⁴ McGowan is particularly swayed by Arendt's

'plurality' argument as he reflects on the American founding fathers and their speech acts that succeeded in producing a *revolutionary* American constitution non-violently.

McGowan therefore finds merit in Arendt's separation of violence and power by arguing that revolutionary acts concerning matters of life can be fought through speech, rather than resorting to violence. Granting that McGowan is persuaded by the distinction between violence and power, he too addresses the question of why violence and power are often found together. McGowan notes that Arendt allowed violence to be considered 'justified' as a 'weapon of reform' when the government is no longer responding to the needs of citizens and citizens wish to reform government through civil disobedience, only then violence is justified. Civil disobedience, for Arendt, is "*concerted action*" as a group of individuals take initiative to come together due to grievances. It must be noted that while such actions here are *justified*, they are still not considered as legitimate forms of political action: violence still causes destruction and does not address issues of the public good through acts of speech like *power* would.

From this standpoint, the aims of violence need to be taken into consideration when deciding if violence can be justified. If violence is capable of opening new channels of political power, with political ends in sight, then it is political. This form of violence does not necessarily conflict with power, as critics have argued; rather, we should view justified violence, especially acts of civil disobedience, as a way to improve politics. Should people feel that they are not treated as equals in society, violence could be a means (albeit a last resort) to bring about an equal society.

It is through the understanding of Arendt's contrast between power and violence that we can decide when violence is anti-political and therefore unacceptable. By keeping the conceptual distinction between violence and power, we do not run the risk of adopting *any* type of violence to achieve our ends a risk undoubtedly posed by the realist idea of power. As the 'question of violence always "bears on moral issues," ...violence always stands in need of justification.'²⁵

Critique Of Arendt's Notion Of Violence

The distinction between violence and power is undoubtedly Arendt's most contentious offering to theories of political power as it places these two concepts in direct conflict with one another. Arendt argues that these concepts are antithetical unlike her other definitions of force, strength and authority. Her

conceptual separation of power and violence has attracted several criticisms on the grounds that it is only a theoretical exercise that displays her intellectual ingenuity or worse, she is guilty of indulging in nostalgia for an idealized Greek polis that never even actually existed.²⁶

Charlene McKibben in his article, *Hannah Arendt's Reflection on Power and Violence*, identifies two major criticisms leveled against Arendt's distinction of power from violence especially in the writing of Jürgen Habermas.²⁷ The first criticism addresses Arendt's allowance of 'justified violence' and how this is perceived to be at odds with her vision of power that finds itself separate from violence. The second criticism is leveled against Arendt's concept that power is not normative and that Arendt neglects strategic action and structural violence.

Jürgen Habermas sees Arendt as usefully placing emphasis on the origin of power as opposed to its means of employment. In contrast to Max Weber, who understands power in terms of particular individuals seeking to realize a fixed goal, she separates power from the *telos* (end), developing what Habermas calls a theory of power as "communicative action". Habermas's notion of communicative action stems from the need to present ways of dealing with democratic politics proper and tilt towards explaining conceptual language.²⁸

Habermas' theory relies on a dichotomy—that of communicative versus strategic action or, to put it in a different formulation, that of action oriented toward reaching understanding versus action oriented toward success. This is the fundamental difference between actions that pursue strategic ends and actions oriented toward reaching understanding. As different from Arendt's work Jürgen Habermas names plurality as the condition for communication, thus quickly moving from distinctness to connection, "the spatial dimension of the life-world is determined by the "fact of human plurality": every interaction unifies multiple perspectives of perception and action of those present..."²⁹

Perceptively and provocatively Habermas compliments this description of the spatial dimension of the world with a temporal one when he posits: "the temporal dimension of the life-world is determined by the "fact of human natality": the birth of every individual means the possibility of a new beginning; to act means to be able to seize the initiative and to do the unanticipated".³⁰

In this description, we see that a kind of conceptual past allows something new to happen in the future. Further, the reference to the past is singular ("the birth of every individual") but allows action between people. So in natality, as Habermas describes it, we go from the past to the future and the individual to the group. The

very emphasis on the origin of power, however, raises the question of how it is to endure over time. The phrase “temporal dimension of the life-world” points to this problem: how to use power in the future when, as Arendt writes in the *Human Condition*, “power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies.” This citation helpfully emphasizes that power shouldn’t be seen as capital that can be deployed at the time that a ruler or executive wishes. Arendt suggests instead that it cannot be virtualized, that it always exists in a one-to-one relation with opinion as it shifts.

Habermas ultimately accuses Arendt of being witty and tricky in taking refuge in the idea of the contract to solve the problem of her radical conception of action. In ending his article with an emphasis on the “contract theory of natural law” however, he overlooks the difference between a promise and a contract in Arendt. The promise offers individual stability of one’s identity over time in the same way that the contract offers consistency to group action and both in a sense win consistency through the virtual. In both cases the reality of identity comes into being only over time. However, there is a different kind of “storage” in the model of the promise than the one we imagine with capital. Arendt suggests the contract as a way to make a short-term structure that retains flexibility that the idea of stockpiled power does not.

As against Habermas, Arendt’s theory of action is normative in that she develops moral-ethical ideals, such as her ideas of equality, inter-subjectivity, plurality, and freedom. It is exactly in the normative sense that we should read Arendt’s work. Charlene McKibben concludes that it is misguided to view Hannah Arendt’s distinction of power and violence as redundant to theories of power; having started as a response to Max Weber’s realist view of the political as having the right to physical force, Arendt’s theory of politics has become more than a critique of political realism. Arendt’s theory of action and power enables us to re-evaluate the world in which we live. Violence and power will always be related in the ‘real world’, and yet there is merit in understanding violence and power as separate concepts.

For Darin Swan, the biggest challenge to *On Violence* is Arendt’s verbosity which meanders from point to point without necessarily coming to any clear conclusions.³¹ He submits that if all 87 pages were edited to make a clear and cogent academic text, this book might have ended up a 10-page essay. Additionally, Arendt cites past understandings on power and violence, but does little to cite contemporaries that do not somehow support her perspective. It is hard to imagine that during the late 60s, during so much political tumult, that

Arendt lacked differing perspectives to her own which she could have drawn from and refuted. Ultimately, he notes that he has different conclusions that Arendt has on this topic, but it still helps him understand an opposing perspective for future consideration.

Andrew Oberg criticizes Arendt on the grounds: first on ambivalence/ambiguousness in her explanation of the concept of violence, second, absence of psychological consideration, third, on skimping on the issues of legitimacy. On the ambiguousness of Arendt's reflections of *On Violence*, he writes:

Arendt takes the stance that the use of violence is disadvantageous to political movements and society generally. For instance, in response to the statement by Sartre that compared violence to Achilles' lance, capable of both striking and healing, Arendt writes straightforwardly that 'if this were true, revenge would be the cure all for most of our ills.' She argues that violence is ultimately counterproductive, that governments that use it to gain power end up actually losing power in the long term, that nonviolent is a redundant term as violence is utterly incapable of creating power, that the use of violence runs the risk of incorporating violence into politics generally and is very likely to bring about a more violent world.³²

She goes further to say:

However, sprinkled among her arguments against the use of violence, increasingly so in the third section of her book, there are a number of instances where, given the language used, what must be termed 'positive' aspects of violence are highlighted. She writes that violence can be justified, that 'in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy,' under the proper circumstances violence, acting as it does without argument, speech or consideration of the consequences, is the 'only way to set the scales of justice right again,' and that rage against hypocrisy, which Arendt earlier

noted was a source of violence, is a rational response to hypocrisy's deceit.³³

Another of Arendt's critics, Andrew Oberg, states that all these statements are incredible enough, given their context in general argument on the use of violence, but Arendt does not stop there. She further states that, "since self-interest is natural, realistic, and focused on the short term, asking people 'to behave nonviolently and argue rationally in matters of interest is neither realistic nor reasonable,' and that violence itself is 'rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it.' This is often followed by a number of examples intended to demonstrate that violence is more often a tool for reform than revolution, citing violent protest that resulted in the implied positive changes being made.³⁴

On the absence of psychological considerations, Oberg observes that Arendt's statements that violence breeds violence and that government born of violence runs the risk of normalizing its use in all later politics are not followed up by explaining the psychological effects that the use of violence inflicts on its perpetrators.

Finally, on the criticism of the legitimacy of power-in-concert, Oberg argues that Arendt's doctrine while based on appeals to the past is but a justification to a future end which implies that changes won through the use of violence can be justified but cannot be legitimized. It creates a problematique for the understanding of the meaning of legitimacy which means the processes of justifying coercively imposed political and social institutions to people who live under them.

He asks the question: where does legitimacy come from in situation where reforms or concessions have been won through the political use of violence? He notes that Arendt does not return to the issue nor expound on government legitimacy generally, except to remark that power is an end to itself and that government, as organized and institutionalized power, cannot really end and the absence of a government will inevitably result in same type of tyranny.³⁵

Conclusion

From the analysis engaged in the evaluation above, assent fell on the priority of power over violence. It does not follow that Arendt rejects violence. She recognizes "that it is particularly tempting ... to equate power with violence, in a discussion

of what actually is only one of power's special cases, namely: the power of government" and indeed because in foreign relations as well as domestic affairs violence appears as a last resort to keep power structure intact.³⁶ Arendt recognizes that violence is only a fitting answer to certain situation. This applies especially in the face of totalitarian evil, oppression or what can be described as 'evil beyond measure and incomprehensible.' This relies majorly on the instrumental nature of violence. Arendt notes that "violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it; ...but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention."³⁷

To ask the impossible in order to obtain the possible is not always counterproductive according to Arendt and, indeed, violence, contrary to what its prophet try to tell us, is more the weapon of reform than revolution.³⁸ By means of reform, Arendt argues that we require a new model for political participation to avoid becoming obedient, unthinking robots. This new approach will not make violence its archetype. Violence is presently glorified because freedom of action is sorely frustrated in modern societies. Our societies have become large and unworkable. Public services are badly eroded; public needs go unmet. The very size of modern societies makes them fracture.

We live in an age of democracy, but democracy has not yet discovered its appropriate institutions. Democracy is a process not an event, it is a desirable ideal to which every country should aim, following the six-point principles of holding periodic free and fair elections, respect for freedom of association, freedom of the press, effective separation of duties to the three arms of government, respect for the rule of law and accountability, transparency in governance.

When a state does not live up to its responsibilities, when it has violated the established rules on which it is founded, that is when citizens do not have equal access to opportunities that are open to all, when the lives, liberties and properties of the citizens have been invaded and when the judiciary the last hope of the common man fails. In the face of these injustices: what shall be the last resort to the common man? This basic question gives birth to the issue of resistance or civil disobedience.³⁹ The aim of civil disobedience is not to overthrow governments or to cause a breakdown of law and order in the society, but to persuade the government in a peaceful manner to withdraw an unjust or oppressive policy. From the foregoing discussion, this research concludes that the appraisal of the concepts of violence and power in Hannah Arendt political philosophy will indeed serve as a veritable critical perspective understanding of power and

violence in our contemporary world. It will also help the universal effort to tame political power and social violence in our globalized world.

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