

Violence

Illuminating Its Political Meaning and Limits

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Hannah Arendt explicitly addressed the topic of violence as such only later in her life. She published *On Violence* in 1970, following the turbulent events of the 1960s, which included the “wholly unexpected” student rebellion and the rise of the Black Power movements, the arms race between the superpowers, and the Vietnam War.¹ These phenomena were all marked by the double bind of the pervasiveness of violence and the awareness of its uncertain potential, which served as the starting point to her ruminations. At the same time, Arendt’s reflections importantly speak to her earlier attempts to come to terms with the twentieth-century specter of totalitarianism, and to reinvigorate the human capacities of understanding and responding to worldly events without reliance on traditional standards of thought. Due to her stark distinction between violence and political power, Arendt’s thoughts on violence have often been dismissed as of little real-world relevance. Her characterization of violence as anti-political, critics claim, represents yet another casualty of her overly narrow understanding of politics that must remain untainted by material concerns or any other instrumental considerations.² Contrary to these interpretations, this chapter pays heed to Arendt’s formulation of her purpose in *On Violence*: “to raise the question of violence in the political realm.”³ In this light, as I shall argue, Arendt’s understanding of the relationship between political power and violence reflects her abiding concern with upholding the distinctly *human* character

and promise of political action. Her aim is to shed light on the human reality and political meaning of violence so as to understand the ways of thinking that abandon politics to the rule of violence and unearth the human powers of resisting its necessity and its destructive effects.

Arendt's reflections on violence are framed as a response to the growing "glorification of violence" in the public realm, to what she saw to be the increasing faith in violence as the most effective means of achieving progressive change.⁴ These experiences lead her to an interrogation of the traditional ways of thinking about violence, tracing the practical fascination with violence to a host of troubling theoretical presuppositions about the relationship between violence and politics. For Arendt, violence is distinct for its instrumental character: it "always stands in need of guidance or justification through the end it pursues."⁵ By this she means that the use of violence as a political means relies on a mentality of making or fabrication, assuming that the plurality and complexity of the world can be ordered, mastered, and transformed in accordance with a pre-given end.⁶ The problem is that this assumption is underlain by a conception of political power as rule over others.⁷ In the prevalent understandings, as in Max Weber or C. Wright Mills, power is conceived as an instrument or a possession, whose essence is command or domination; it corresponds to an ability "to assert my own will against the resistance of others," and to compel them to "act as I choose."⁸ But if political power is construed in terms of "the effectiveness of command," then violence becomes merely "the most flagrant manifestation of power."⁹

What this conflation of politics with violence neglects is the alternative notion of power as "living power," which is a manifestation of "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."¹⁰ For Arendt, the world of politics is grounded upon the fundamental existential condition of human plurality, consisting of individuals engaging in action and speech in the company of their peers, beginning anew and appearing to each other. On this account, power only arises and is sustained when people interact with each other, exchange opinions on matters of shared concern, and thereby bring into existence a common world as a public space for free participation and discussion between plural equals.¹¹ Given the phenomenal nature and the attendant unpredictability of political affairs, the use of violence always carries within itself the danger that "the means overwhelm the end."¹² This is because, as an embodiment of a desire to "produce" results, violence destroys "the sheer human togetherness" that undergirds the human character and import of political power as "an end in itself."¹³ Just as any violent act denies human plurality, a systematic resort to violence tears apart the fabric of the shared world within which human words and deeds could appear. As Arendt writes, violence "can destroy power," but "it is utterly incapable of creating it."¹⁴ This danger is clearly evident in the modern revolutionary tradition, dominated as it is by teleological interpretations of political action and history as instantiations of the processual, progressive self-realization of humankind.¹⁵

Within this framework, any “regress” can be justified as a necessary step toward the eventual triumph of universal human freedom, while destroying along the way all stable yardsticks by which to orient our actions.¹⁶ From here, it took but a step to claims, found in writers like Sartre, Sorel, and Fanon, that violence itself is “a life promoting force,” a means of “man recreating himself.”¹⁷ For Arendt, the belief in violence as an embodiment of life’s creativity ultimately exposed the troubling political implications of the traditional concept of power as rule and the means-ends thinking underlying it. In identifying power and violence with natural drives subject to a self-reinforcing movement of growth and decay, this “biological” justification of violence in effect expunges humans from meaningful intersubjective interaction in the public realm, and reduces them to mere automata, borne thoughtlessly along the stream of larger historical or biological forces.¹⁸

Arendt’s insights into the anti-political character of violence, however, do not amount to a simplistic banishment of violence from the realm of politics proper. In fact, she explicitly acknowledges that the dichotomy does not correspond to “watertight compartments in the real world,” and that we can hardly find the two phenomena “in their pure and therefore extreme form.”¹⁹ Her distinction between violence and power, instead, works to question the view of violence as an inevitable aspect of politics and to examine their complex interrelationship.

Arendt was too attuned to the (constraining) worldly conditions and ambiguity of political action to embrace a pacifist stance. Recognizing the limits of nonviolent resistance, she asserts that in some cases, violence is justifiable as “the only way to set the scales of justice right again.”²⁰ Yet she seeks to ensure that a decision to resort to violence is tied to human freedom and concomitant responsibility, rather than any conceived “necessity,” and hence is attentive to the limits that ensue from acting in a plural world. Her efforts to negotiate a limit to violence can be well demonstrated through her distinction between liberation and (political) freedom. While violence may be required to achieve liberation from oppression as a precondition for politics among plural equals, it is a dangerous mistake to think that a resort to violent means could realize public freedom or constitute a political community. Arendt was especially wary of attempts to put violence in the service of grand revolutionary causes, such as happiness or classless society.²¹ In this case, violent means easily assume the form of a systematic practice, imposing upon a plurality of perspectives the validity of a single truth, eliminating dissent and threatening a lapse into terror.²² Arendt also rejected as untenable the proposition that “the strong fraternal sentiments” engendered by collective violence could provide a source of a new form of political relationship.²³ Because the fraternity of violence comes into being in circumstances of “immediate danger to life and limb,” she held, it is too “transitory” to form the foundation of a body politic.²⁴ Moreover, Arendt was focused on the political cost of violence, aware that any violent act risks entrenching new cycles of violence and introducing “the practice of

violence into the whole body politic.”²⁵ The “very high” price of violence, as she emphasizes, relates not merely to “the vanquished,” to those individuals or perspectives whose freedom has been denied, but to the loss of power suffered by the victors as well, to the atrophy of the political world as a meaningful human world.²⁶ Any use of violent means, then, must be willing to assume the burden of responsibility and tackle the question of how to reinvigorate a space for properly political interaction among former enemies.

Arendt’s outright rejection of any predetermined instrumentalist justifications of violent means prompted commentators to maintain that her account disregards the deeply embodied and structural workings of violence—overestimating the human capacities to transcend or break the entrenched cycles of destructiveness.²⁷ Arguably, however, Arendt was hardly oblivious of the recalcitrant structures of violence, but was determined to face up to these structures by foregrounding the issue of justifying violence as a human, political affair, subject to an exchange and negotiation within a plurality of different perspectives.²⁸ As she recognized, rage or indignation (and the violence that may follow in their wake) constitute “natural,” human responses to injustice, rather than mere irrational or pathological reactions.²⁹ What Arendt feared was the temptation to rationalize these human responses into “pseudo-scientific theories” in the form of either sociobiological interpretations of human aggressiveness or life philosophies’ attempts to unearth the emancipatory potentials inherent in human libidinal drives.³⁰ Both tendencies risk transforming any concrete grievance into a boundless emotion that is no longer tied to any particular context and that evinces a manifest insensibility to the plural and complex character of political reality.³¹ In this vein, Arendt cautioned against the “murderousness” of violence employed in interracial struggle. For based on “organic metaphors,” such as black or white skin, racial violence would preclude in advance the possibility of speech and persuasion, proceeding in line with the unyielding “rational” logic of “an explicit ideological system.”³²

Arendt’s affirmation of limits, in contrast, translated into an insistence that violence can only be undertaken for the sake of human plurality and the world, for the sake of opening or protecting a space for politics, rather than in order to produce or create a desired state of affairs. Violence can be justified, for instance, to “dramatize grievances” and so to give voice to previously disregarded perspectives, to protect the innocent, or in a struggle for freedom against foreign occupation.³³ In this way, violence remains a response to particular situations, limited to the pursuit of “short-term” goals, while retaining a sense of its unpredictable consequences and preventing “a glorification or justification of violence as such.”³⁴ The relevance of this distinction emerges in Arendt’s Second-World-War-era call for the formation of a Jewish army to join the fight against Hitler as “the beginning of Jewish politics.”³⁵ The willingness to fight for their freedom would allow the Jews to defend themselves as Jews, as they were attacked, and so refuse to be reduced to passive objects or eternal victims of persecution.³⁶ Nonetheless,

this fight would not be wedded to the achievement of political community understood as gradual emancipation of a given oppressed identity, but limited to the Jews' affirming themselves as part of Europe's common struggle for freedom and equality.³⁷ As Arendt **was** clear, a body politic could only be established through the free confrontation of differences among individual Jews, across various groupings and divisions, and within Palestine and worldwide.³⁸ This political limitation on the use of violence also helps dispense with the tendency "to play the oppressor as soon as one is liberated."³⁹ After the liberation, for example, Arendt warned against the Zionist aspiration to redeem a Jewish identity through the establishment of an autonomous national state that remained isolated from the surrounding Arab world and reliant on the protection of great powers.⁴⁰ The sovereign attempt to institute a political community outside of the existing web of political relationships—in "a vacuum," as it were—missed "the simple fact that Palestine is being inhabited by two different peoples."⁴¹ This attempt to establish a community without regard for the given political reality could only breed the necessity of war.⁴²

Attentive to the political cost of violence, Arendt's perspective also highlights the importance of confronting those worldly conditions that make a resort to violence seem the "only" possible way left of affirming the human ability to change the world.⁴³ She draws attention to "the disastrous shrinkage of the public realm" in modern times.⁴⁴ The reduction of politics to a realm of bureaucratic administration led to the increasing atrophy of a space where individuals could appear to each other, present their grievances, and engage in discussion about forms of living together.⁴⁵ Yet, just as she observes that "every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence," Arendt praises the immense potential of (nonviolent) political power to dissolve ossified forces of oppression.⁴⁶ In her reflections on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, she recounts how the people's coming together in public to articulate their demands, without leadership, party program, or ideology "imposed from above," could bring down the power structures of the dictatorship "in a couple of days."⁴⁷ This event substantiated Arendt's broader observation that systemic violence (of the state) ultimately is powerless once popular support dwindles and "commands are no longer obeyed."⁴⁸ But what was even more remarkable was the way the Hungarian "revolutionary spirit" of public freedom was immediately institutionalized in the spontaneous creation of councils. Lacking a theoretical grounding, this form of political organization was based on the power of opinion, discussion, and persuasion, rather than the force of faction or ideology, and thereby managed to prevent the revolution disintegrating into mob rule and violence.⁴⁹

Arendt's faith in the political potential of acting-together similarly surfaces in her argument for the right of civil disobedience as the best "remedy" for the "failure of institutions" and the conspicuous loss of power suffered by political systems around the world.⁵⁰ An institutional "home" for free association would provide a space where the legitimacy of laws could be

constantly augmented by the “living power” of human plurality, the public articulation of both consent and dissent.⁵¹ To be sure, Arendt was aware that freedom of assembly represents one of the “most dangerous” rights, carrying with itself the “danger of violence, inherent in the disaffection of a whole generation.”⁵² This danger cannot be warded off by eliminating freedom of assembly under sovereign rule, which, as we have seen, renders violence a necessary course of political action as such. It must be confronted by remaining loyal to power’s inspiring principle, the mutual interaction of citizens around worldly matters of shared concern rather than ideological commitments.⁵³ The purpose is thus to minimize the possibility of violence by nurturing the web of human relationships as the mainspring of living power and endeavoring to provide the conditions for a properly human existence for a plurality of perspectives inhabiting the common world.

To conclude, it is Arendt’s distinct contribution to think violence as a political affair, and not as a necessity, that could be rationalized in advance and subject to a self-evident processual movement. Her insights into the political meaning of violence contain an appeal to affirm the limits of violence inhering in the intersubjective character of the world, and to foster the conditions for action-in-concert that make a resort to violence less likely. In this respect, Arendt’s reflections articulate her general distrust of approaching the dilemmas of politics in the mode of so-called professional “problem-solvers,” bent on designing hypothetical, self-contained theoretical formulas or predictions of future events, only to eliminate their contingency.⁵⁴ For the confrontation with the perplexities at stake then assumes the form of reckoning with consequences, of developing adequate solutions based on logical deduction from the given premises, while rendering irrelevant the public practices of discussion, persuasion, and judgment. And the greater the aspiration toward controlling the flow of events that we have not had an opportunity to understand—that is, irrespective of their human import and implications—the greater the possibility that our power will end in “impotence” and that violence will “have the last word.”⁵⁵

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (London: Harcourt Publishers, 1972), 105–84.
- 2 See e.g., Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (1977): 13–24.

- 3 Ibid., 134.
- 4 Ibid., 121, 132.
- 5 Ibid., 150.
- 6 Ibid., 150, 176–77.
- 7 Ibid., 134–39, 151.
- 8 Ibid., 135–36.
- 9 Ibid., 136, 134.
- 10 Ibid., 140, 143.
- 11 Ibid., 139–40, 143.
- 12 Ibid., 177, 106.
- 13 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 180; Arendt, “Violence,” 150.
- 14 Arendt, “Violence,” 155.
- 15 Ibid., 113–15.
- 16 Ibid., 128, 155.
- 17 Ibid., 170–71, 114.
- 18 Ibid., 172–73.
- 19 Ibid., 145–46.
- 20 Ibid., 161.
- 21 Ibid., 150–51, 176; see also Hannah Arendt, “The Freedom to Be Free,” *New England Review* 38, no. 2 (2017): 56–69.
- 22 Arendt, “Violence,” 153–55.
- 23 Ibid., 166.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 177.
- 26 Ibid., 152–53.
- 27 See Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, “On Politics and Violence: Arendt contra Fanon,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2008): 90–108, 103–7.
- 28 Arendt, “Violence,” 179.
- 29 Ibid., 160–61.
- 30 Ibid., 173, 156–72.
- 31 Ibid., 161–63; see also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 80.
- 32 Arendt, “Violence,” 172–73.
- 33 Ibid., 176; Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 166–67.
- 34 Ibid., 176; Arendt, *Revolution*, 9.
- 35 Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 136–39.
- 36 Ibid., 137.

- 37 Ibid., 141–42.
- 38 Ibid., 143–44, 333, 171, 175.
- 39 Ibid., 170.
- 40 Ibid., 336.
- 41 Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 44, 412.
- 42 Ibid., 44, 412.
- 43 Arendt, “Violence,” 178–80.
- 44 Ibid., 178.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid., 184.
- 47 Hannah Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” *The Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (1958): 5–43; 26–28.
- 48 Arendt, “Violence,” 146–48.
- 49 Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism,” 28–32.
- 50 Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of the Republic*, 51–102; 101–2.
- 51 Ibid., 101, 94–95.
- 52 Hannah Arendt, “Is America By Nature A Violent Society?: ‘Lawlessness Is Inherent In the Uprooted,’” *New York Times*, April 28, 1968, SM24.
- 53 Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” 97–98.
- 54 Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” in *Crises of the Republic*, 9; Arendt, “Violence,” 108, 130–31.
- 55 Arendt, “Violence,” 109, 183–84, 172.