

Critique of Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*

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I. Introduction

Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*¹ was written in 1969 as a response to the events current at the time, particularly the worldwide student uprisings, the African American civil rights movement in the US, and the rising levels of terrorism and other forms of violence both in the US and Europe.² Since its publication the book has enjoyed a good deal of attention, and although it has made many valuable contributions to the topic of violence in politics, particularly, to my mind at least, in carefully distinguishing between 'power' and 'violence', her arguments lack the potency they may have otherwise had for a number of reasons. In the following I will examine these beginning with the work's ultimately ambivalent attitude towards violence, its failure to discuss what violence does psychologically to those who wield it, and its lack of depth on the issue of legitimacy regarding political goals achieved through violence.

II. Neither here nor there on the use of violence

Arendt begins her book with a wide-scale focus on the war in Vietnam and the cloud of fear that the Cold War's nuclear standoff had produced. She writes that conventional warfare, in the few places where it could still occur in the absence of the nuclear umbrella (or rather, under the 'holes' of the umbrella), was nevertheless limited by the constant threat of hostilities escalating to the point where nuclear weapons are used, provoking a response, and plunging the world into Armageddon.³

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1969).

² Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7 (2008), 90-108.

³ It is interesting to note that writing from the vantage point of 2011, twenty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the détente that the balance of the superpowers had achieved, the world has been suffering under a near constant barrage of Western 'intervention' in developing and post-colonial nations that had previously been unreachable. This remarkable increase in violence does have its supporters, but the situation was viewed with

Growing up in this environment, Arendt suggests that young people the world over have acquired a collective sense of doom, that they have no faith in the abilities of science and technology to stop the application of their achievements to war, and that it may well be this mindset that had sparked the uprisings.⁴ It is from this global perspective then, in which violence in international affairs had become less of an option, the appeal of violence in domestic affairs had therefore increased, and students who had initially rejected violence after learning about the Nazi horrors of World War II, that war's high civilian casualties, genocide and torture, later embraced it and even praised it as an effective means of achieving collective goals,⁵ that Arendt is addressing her work.

Before proceeding further with the stance taken vis- á-vis violence in politics in *On Violence*, it will be necessary to define what is meant by the term 'violence'. Arendt, who, again, purposed to clearly delineate violence from power, defined it as being instrumental in nature, and as that which augments natural strength, whereas power is the ability to act together.⁶ The distinction she draws here appears to be primarily important for her later discussions of power however, for the examples she uses when writing of violent acts are generally more in line with a conventional understanding. Closer to the ordinary usage of 'violence', Frazer and Hutchings define it as intentional physical injury of others for political purposes,⁷ and Munck, quoting John Keane, as, '...the more or less intended direct but unwanted physical interference, by groups and/or individuals, with the bodies of others'.⁸ We can

sufficient empathy by Munck to cause him to refer to the Cold War's détente as being 'rather quaint'. For commentary on this and a very insightful section on gendered violence, see Ronaldo Munck, 'Deconstructing Violence: Power, Force, and Social Transformation', *Latin American Perspectives*, 35 (2008), 3-19 (p. 4).

⁴ This potential cause, however, is later superseded by Arendt herself who writes that it may be the rise of bureaucracy and its 'rule by Nobody', under which grievances cannot be directed at anyone specifically and responsibility cannot likewise be assigned with any certainty, that the worldwide student movements are directed against. Which of these two explanations proved to be more accurate, however, is an issue that cannot be covered here. Arendt, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17 and p. 81 (Quote p. 81).

⁵ Arendt, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-15.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 44, 46.

⁷ Frazer and Hutchings, *op. cit.*

⁸ John Keane, *Violence and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), in Munck, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

therefore approach violence as the use of instruments to inflict physical harm on others for the purposes of promoting a political goal(s). From this perspective then, how is Arendt's treatment of violence ambiguous?

Early on in *On Violence* Arendt takes the stance that the use of violence is disadvantageous to political movements and society generally. For instance, in response to a 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'.⁹ She argues that violence is ultimately counterproductive, that governments that use it to gain power end up actually losing power in the long term,¹⁰ that nonviolent power is a redundant term as violence is 'utterly incapable' of creating power,¹¹ 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.¹² 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 the 'positive' aspects of violence are highlighted. She writes that violence can be justified,¹³ 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',¹⁴ that 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',¹⁵ and that rage against hypocrisy, which Arendt earlier noted was a source of violence,¹⁶ is a rational response to hypocrisy's deceit.¹⁷ All of these statements are incredible enough, given their context in a general argument against 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

⁹ Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 54.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 56.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 66.

argue rationally in matters of interest is neither realistic nor reasonable',¹⁸ and that violence itself is 'rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it'.¹⁹ This is then followed by a number of examples intended to demonstrate that violence is more often a tool for reform than revolution, citing violent protests that resulted in the implied positive changes being made (though Arendt does question the effectiveness of such protests in gaining long-term structural alterations).²⁰ Finally, in another example of her admittance that violence can be appropriate under certain situations, Miss Arendt argues that Gandhi's nonviolent revolution was only possible because it was directed against the United Kingdom, and that were Gandhi's adversary Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, the result would have been 'massacre and submission'.²¹ This may or may not have been the case, as it stands we can only consider the point as conjecture since there are no parallel analogies that can be drawn with Gandhi's movement to protests within Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, and this further ignores actual massacres that the British army inflicted upon participants in the nonviolent independence movement like the Amritsar Massacre.²² (Admittedly, the British were not systematically brutal in the way the Nazis or Stalin's regime was, but in my opinion their misdeeds are too often glossed over in the nonviolence-only-works-against-a-moral-adversary argument. The views each took towards their subjects, underlying and informing their actions, could arguably be said to differ essentially only in terms of degree as all three operated within the terrible and dehumanizing logic of empire.) All of this, taken together, exhibits a fairly murky attitude towards the use of violence in politics, and furthermore fails to explore the complicated situational relationships between protestors and police, in which both sides have been shown to produce violent reactions in the other,²³ or the

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 53.

²² 'Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948)', *BBC - History - Historic Figures*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/gandhi_mohandas.shtml>. Accessed 14 December 2011.

²³ Herbert M. Kritzer, 'Political Protest and Political Violence: A Nonrecursive Causal Model', *Social Forces*, 55:3 (1977), 630-640. Interestingly, this article also notes that if a protest campaign rejects violence at its outset that choice is likely to dominate the entire campaign,

employment of nonviolent protest other than sit-ins, marches, and the like, such as the use of economic tools to force concessions.²⁴ While the works referenced in regard to these final two aspects did not yet exist at the time Arendt was writing, the issues they discuss certainly did.

III. Absence of psychological considerations

Violence breeds violence, and governments born of violence run the risk of normalizing its use in all later politics; both of these points are made by Arendt and yet she fails to follow up on them by exploring the psychological effects that the use of violence inflicts on its perpetrators. Frantz Fanon, in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, charts the psychological, emotional, social, and physical effects of violence both on those who use it and those who are the victims of it, and in repeated examples shows that suffering remains long after the violence has occurred.²⁵ In summarizing him, Frazer and Hutchings write that ‘The torturer is unable to stop the screams. A child is unable to grasp that the killing of a friend on grounds of enemy identity might be wrong’.²⁶ Munck notes that ordinary violence often increases in a society following the end of an armed conflict, a trend which points to an altered mindset regarding violence among the population, and states that ‘When normalization of the abnormal occurs, violence has begun to achieve its objectives’.²⁷ This point is also reinforced by Kebede, who notes that sublimating anger into creative works is a much more curative act of anger than releasing it in violent outbursts,²⁸ again hinting at negative, and lasting, psychological effects of violence. Anyone who has ever harmed others through violence, or been harmed by violence, or even known someone who falls into either of those two categories, can also attest to this, yet the complete absence of discussion along these lines from Arendt’s book is both striking and regrettable, particularly given the personal hardships she faced

and that even if such a choice is not overtly made no violence is likely to occur in instances where both its use and non-use is seen as being equally efficacious.

²⁴ Messay Kebede, ‘The Rehabilitation of Violence and the Violence of Rehabilitation: Fanon and Colonialism’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 31:5 (2001), 539-562.

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001), in Frazer and Hutchings, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁷ Munck, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁸ Kebede, *op. cit.*

both in Germany and France during a time of incredible and widespread violence.²⁹

IV. Skimming on the issue of legitimacy

To my mind, the issue of legitimacy is an important one, particularly in situations where reforms or concessions have been won through the political use of violence. In such cases, where victory for the agitating party was forcibly wrested from the other—whether or not the spoils won were the result of compromise—there are bound to be many who are left upset by the results, naturally among the losing group, but also among the ordinary residents or citizens who chose not to get directly involved. How are such people to be won over? How are they to view the changes that have also been forced on them as members of the community where the changes took place? Nagel has defined political legitimacy as ‘justifying coercively imposed political and social institutions to the people who have to live under them’.³⁰ He then goes on to write that justifications are aimed at persuading reasonable people, and that political stability is assisted by the wide-spread agreement to its underlying principles in society. This is an argument that is likely to be readily accepted by most people in any given community, and we know from experience that reforms are usually explained in this way to us by politicians, or that they are simply labeled as being the products of the majority of representatives in government, whom, we are reminded, we voted in in the first place. Arendt, however, writes that legitimacy is derived from power’s original getting together (and we must keep in mind that when Arendt writes of power she writes of the ability to act in concert), that is, how it sets itself up, and that legitimacy is based on appeals to the past, but justification to a future end.³¹ By this argument, changes won through the use of violence can be justified but cannot be legitimized. Where, then, would legitimacy come from in such a case? Unfortunately, we are left to wonder as Arendt does not return to the issue nor expound on governmental legitimacy generally, save to remark that power is an

²⁹ Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, ‘Hannah Arendt’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, First published 27 July 2006 (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Stanford University <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/arendt/>>. Accessed 14 December 2011.

³⁰ Thomas Nagel, ‘Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16:3 (1987), 215-240 (p. 218).

³¹ Arendt, *op. cit.*, 52.

end to itself and that government, as 'organized and institutionalized power', cannot really end and if its absence is sought the inevitable result will be some type of tyranny.³² Are we to understand that government's legitimacy, and that of the measures it enacts, come part and parcel with its existence? I feel that *On Violence* would be a more powerful argument if Arendt's thoughts here were more thoroughly presented, at the very least in giving some examples of power setting itself up in a legitimate way.

V. Conclusion

Although Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* is an interesting study of contemporary events, making some valuable contributions to the field, especially its conceptual differentiation of the terms 'power' and 'violence', the book has some major insufficiencies. Three of these have been covered here: its overall ambiguity on the use of violence, its lack of psychological considerations, and its shallowness in discussing political legitimacy.

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³² Arendt, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52 (Quote p. 51).

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