



On Violence

Hannah Arendt

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An analysis of the nature, causes, and significance of violence in the second half of the twentieth century. Arendt also reexamines the relationship between war, politics, violence, and power.

“Incisive, deeply probing, written with clarity and grace, it provides an ideal framework for understanding the turbulence of our times.”

The Nation

On Violence Details

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Author : Hannah Arendt

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Justin Evans says

Had this been written by Joan Bloggs, it would be out of print and almost certainly ignored. But it was written by Hannah Arendt, so it's in print. And given the lack of books on violence, that's probably a good thing. Unfortunately I suspect that it can easily be misread. The historical context here is everything: Arendt isn't writing about violence, she's writing about violence at the end of the 'sixties and start of the 'seventies, when for a brief moment fairly large numbers of people thought it was okay to blow up unjust things. Arendt makes her standard republican (not the party, which is increasingly less, you know, republican) argument that communal action can interrupt unjust structures, whereas violence can do so only very rarely, and for very short periods of time.

And she's also arguing against sociobiology's first golden age (if that's really the right term for it); people like Lorenz tried to find biological or psychological grounds for aggression, which has the obvious effect of naturalizing it and making it impossible to argue against. Not to mention being extremely silly, but that doesn't stop anyone in today's golden (again, wrong term) age of evo-psycho-sociobiology.

She argues by distinguishing between 'power,' which is what we have when we act communally; 'strength,' which is what an individual can do on her own; 'force,' which "should be reserved" for natural or structural force rather than intentional force; 'authority,' which is the possession of unquestioned leaders; and finally 'violence,' which is only ever an instrument to the ends of power or authority. This is all tendentious, but she puts it to good use.

Arendt argues on the basis of these definitions that revolution begins with a loss of authority, not with violent deeds; and that violence is not necessarily irrational. Fair enough.

But that seventies moment is far in the past. There aren't many people left who favor revolutionary violence (for better and worse); evo-psycho-sociobiologists spend their time naturalizing addictions rather than aggression; and making republican (not the party) arguments in public is met everywhere with scorn (on the right because you don't want the government's hand in your wallet; on the left because you don't want the government's hand on your privates).

What's left are a couple of interesting obiter dicta:

- i) That the U.S.A. started out as an anti-sovereigntist entity, but then took over the idea of sovereignty from Old Europe.
- ii) More bureaucracy will lead to more violence, because when there's nobody to blame with words, people lash out with limbs and weapons.

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

Hannah Arendt does an excellent job of tracing the thread of violence through the quilt of violent acts.

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Iman says

Now, this was disappointing!

Part I is clearly dated, I was ,nevertheless, surprised from Arendt's trivialization of black student movement, and generally from here "lumping" of the Neo-Leftists student movements across both sides of the Atlantic. Part II, Arendt introduces here definition of Power, Strength, Force, Authority and Violence. Her definition of Power seemed simplistic to me (Where's Gramsci in all of this I kept asking). In this part she introduces the basic premise of the book and that is Power and Violence are opposites, Violence appears when Power is in jeopardy but left to its own course it will ultimately lead to Power's disappearance.

The notion of bureaucracy (the rule of an intricate system of bureaus: The rule of Nobody) is the most tyrannical form of rule, there is no one to ask, no one to address, there isn't a single enemy. It renders everyone powerless and with the loss of Power, Violence becomes inevitable. This is a good premises which she could have built on, but she doesn't develop it any further.

Foucault's ideas of Power and violence on the other hand are much more developed. In Foucault's earlier works (in Discipline and Punish for example) Power is inherent in such systems and perpetuates itself endlessly through the technologies of control and discipline. Which leaves us with the idea of powerless individuals, however what Foucault develops in his later works is the idea that Power is not a stand-alone essence that exists in individuals, its not an ability (Arendt) rather it is ACTION, it is not the opposite of violence, for the opposite of violence is passivity...anyway, this is not a discussion of Foucault.

I understand that Arendt's purpose was not tackle violence as an implement, but as a concept. But, I am still left with many questions.

Robert Wechsler says

Although structured as a three-part essay, this is essentially two intertwined essays in one. Each is interesting in a different way. The ideas of one, focused on the engagé moment, come out of the student revolutions in Europe and the U.S. (and, to a lesser extent, black power). This essay takes the reader back (if old enough) to an interesting moment that turned out not to have had a great effect, politically, on the future (its greatest effect, especially in the U.S., has been the reaction to it). Think student revolution now, and you think of

Iran. It was also the time when nuclear deterrence put violence in a different light than today, when violence is thought of mainly in terms of terrorism, civil wars, and drones.

The other essay, more universal, is largely definitional. Arendt did a great job separating the concepts of power, authority, and violence.

“[T]he power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category.”

“Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future. Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future.”

Hence, “Violence can destroy power ... What never can grow out of it is power.”

“To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.” Yes and, unfortunately, no.

Martin says

A fantastic treatise on the nature and function of violence, particularly in the modern period. However, the focus is overwhelmingly from the political dimension. Divided into three parts, parts 2 and 3 are essential reading. Part 1 oftentimes comes off as dated in its examples and outlook. But it is Part 2 that makes the entire book. In it, Arendt carefully delineates and differentiates definitions for "Power", "Strength", "Force", "Authority", and "Violence". All of which are useful if not necessary in thinking about the state of affairs today. I also found memorable her description of bureaucracy, that form of government based on intentional distance and anonymity. She labels it the "rule by Nobody", a succinct but capturing descriptor.

The book is highly recommended for the "concerned" and "active" out there as it pushes us to think more carefully about the various causes and systems we either stand behind or are caught in.

Gill says

This book makes clear that Arendt is amazingly well read... Though, given 50 years, I am always amazed at how much more we are supposed to read (and often how much less we do) as modern academics and students rather than academics in the 1950s and 60s.

While I can see the relevance of Arendt's writing on this subject in reference to the time the book was published and in response to authors like Sorel and Fannon, unlike many of the other reviewers I am not a fan of this book. Her, at times polemical, arguments do not clarify anything for me and don't promote learning through questioning, they replace erroneous concepts with more erroneous concepts. Her book, rather than clarifying the way terms and concepts could be used or leading us to interesting ideas, is full of frustratingly confounded and under-developed concepts.

The basic premise of the book is that a "lack of power begets violence." While this is an interesting beginning, it relies on mistaken understandings of power and violence and simply reveals how writers like Lukes and Foucault were sorely needed to revolutionize the concept of Power; how thoughts of resistance had yet to filter through from Brechtian theater to James Scott's peasants and academic debate; and how writers like Kalyvas and Galtung are crucial for the current clarification and study of violence.

Power is lamely described as the "human ability not just to act [individually:] but to act in concert with." (44) This is what Lukes would call a one dimensional power concept. It does not confront how power reflects who wins the game, who makes the rules of the game, and how the rules are internalized. Indeed, it barely hints at the coming understanding of power as entitlements (the power to the good life, Sen). She boils this further down through confused definitions of strength, force, and authority until she reaches the conclusion that Power is fundamentally 'political consensus and legitimacy.' Violence is never clearly defined. Though, it becomes obvious that she is referring to corporeal violence, with broad application of violence within other modes of political action. With these concepts she cannot confront structural or cultural violence, or even oppression and resistance.

Working off the premise that power is control (guaranteed through political consensus) she points to physical violence as a symptom of lost power or changes in power (that is lost consensus or changes in consensus). Because Power is conceptualized only as 'civitas' and consensus (really she fails to clearly present this argument), she misses the role of physical violence as a way to ENFORCE power, the strategic application of violence to maintain or gain power (Kalyvas, see Eastern Congo), and falls back on a sort of Hobbesian view of the world... without order there is chaos and violence. Rather than see violence as a lack of power, we should see the role of violence as a strategy to maintain and gain power, as fundamental to power, as common in transitions between power, and in the loss of consensus. Then we can find ways to minimize physical violence by doing things such as promoting social justice in the face of institutional violence and prejudices, facilitating peaceful political and economic changes, and engendering consensus.

Where there is a lack of incentives to use physical violence and a capacity to reach real social and political consensus through nonviolent means, I would imagine that direct physical violence would be less prevalent. I imagine this is what Arendt wants to say, but she ultimately misdefines "power" and under theorizes "violence".

Benoît Lelièvre says

In order to appreciate this book, you have to understand Hannah Arendt here is thinking of violence in political terms: war, uprising, rebellion, etc. That said, some of her points are applicable on the complete spectrum of human violence. The fact that it is a mean and not an end for example. That is served as a theater for the cause it is serving and that is what makes it terrifying when properly used. Arendt also wisely draws a line between purposeful violence and emotional violence, which helps her definition of the term as instrumental. The book is, of course a little dated because it addresses mostly issues of the cold war, which are not pertinent anymore, but I've learned a thing or two and appreciated Arendt's straight, no bs prose. Nice change from french post-structuralists!

Fatma AbdelSalam says

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Hannah Arendt

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Ana says

I can feel myself slowly falling in love with Arendt. I already respected her, having been in the process of reading her "Origins" book for some time now. But in these shorter works of hers, you can really see her reasoning power and witness how perfectly balanced her turns of phrase are. What I most like about "On Violence" is that I can detect the research that has gone into writing this small essay. Her sentences are very compact, so in the end even a few of them can relay a lot of information. I would recommend this to anyone with an interest in the distinction between violence and power and how the two act if used in any political discourse.

Marwa Assem Salama says

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While examining why the student movements of the '60s reached a boiling point, something I didn't expect when I first opened the cover, Arendt disentangles Mao Zedong's axiom that power grows from the barrel of a gun. By clearly and concisely distinguishing terms like power, violence, and authority, words we tend to use synonymously in political discourse, the true source of power is revealed--political action conducted in concert with others--which she then extends to explain the collective feeling of powerlessness that continues to persist in modern democratic societies. Her theory in this piece raises important questions that are even more relevant today than they were in her time, questions that were never resolved by the protests of the '60s, leaving us with a haunting sense that the current trajectory of the modern State, absorbing more and more power into a faceless central bureaucracy that will never hear nor alleviate our grievances, is reaching another watershed moment, another crisis, that is bound to push the disempowered toward the last recourse of political action--violence.

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Ahmed M. Gamil says

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Imane says

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"Racism, white or black, is fraught with violence by definition because it objects to natural organic facts - a white or black skin - which no persuasion or power could change; all one can do, when the chips are down, is to exterminate their bearers. Racism, as distinguished from race, is not a fact of life, but an ideology, and the

deeds it leads to are not reflex actions, but deliberate acts based on pseudo-scientific theories. Violence in interracial struggle is always murderous, but it is not "irrational"; it is the logical and rational consequence of racism, by which I do not mean some rather vague prejudices on either side, but an explicit ideological system."

"The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict."

I'm thinking about more right now, but I haven't found the best way to express it yet. I want to write about the way the book made me think differently about how Americans were celebrating the death of Osama bin Laden, and what this says about us and the war on terror. So I'll probably be editing this in the future to add some about this, using a few of the quotes above, and maybe some others.
