

# Hannah Arendt's Reflections on Violence and Power

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*Abstract: Focusing on her essay "On Violence", I explain and defend the sharp distinction that Hannah Arendt draws between power and violence. Although fully aware of how power and violence are frequently combined, she argues that they are conceptually distinct – even antithetical. I show how these concepts are related to many other themes in her thinking including politics, action, speech, persuasion, and judgment. I also explore the wider context of the role of violence in her philosophic and political thinking. She challenges not only contemporary and traditional ways of understanding power and violence but provides an important critical perspective for understanding power and violence in the contemporary world.*

1.

In 1970, Hannah Arendt published her controversial essay, "On Violence."<sup>1</sup> The essay grew out of her participation in a heated panel on "The Legitimacy of Violence" that took place three years earlier at the famous Theatre for Ideas – a meeting place for New York intellectuals. Chaired by Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books*, the other members of the panel were Noam Chomsky, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and Robert Lowell. And in the audience there were also active discussants including Susan Sontag and Tom Hayden, a leader of SDS.<sup>2</sup> Arendt had lived through the turbulent 1960's with mixed emotions. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the early civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the nonviolent student sit-ins in universities. (She even joined her students who were occupying a building at the University of Chicago.) But she was alarmed by the growth of the Black Power

<sup>1</sup> *On Violence* is an expanded version of "Reflections of Violence" originally published in 1969 in the *Journal of International Affairs* and reprinted in the *New York Review of Books* (February 17, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the panel discussion, the interventions of Sontag and Hayden, and Arendt's reactions to the student movement, see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 412-421.

movement and the increasingly shrill rhetoric of violence in the student movement throughout the world. Arendt never hesitated to express her opinions forcefully, even when they were unpopular. Many readers of *On Violence* were (and still are) offended. Her harsh remarks about Negroes and the Black Power movement were condemned as “racist” (even though she strongly condemns racism in the same essay).<sup>3</sup> And some of her comments – especially if taken out of context – are shockingly offensive. Speaking about the student movement in the United States, she says: “Serious violence entered the scene only with the appearance of the Black Power movement on the campuses. Negro students, the majority of them admitted without academic qualification, regarded and organized themselves as an interest group, the representatives of the black community. Their interest was to lower academic standards.”<sup>4</sup> She adds fuel to the fire when declares that a large minority of the Negro community stands “behind the verbal and actual violence of the black students.” She is equally condemning of the “academic establishment” in its “curious tendency” to yield to “Negro demands, even if they are clearly silly and outrageous.”<sup>5</sup> It is as if the rhetoric and instances of actual violence touched a deep sensitive nerve in Arendt – perhaps a reminder of what she had experienced in Germany in the early 1930s. But, given her own provocative rhetoric, it not difficult to understand why so many were shocked and dismissive of her essay. This is unfortunate because Arendt, I want to argue, develops some of the most penetrating reflections on violence in the political realm. The truth is, as we shall see, that Arendt’s concern with violence can be traced back to some of her earliest writings. Arendt insisted that thinking grows out of personal experiences. She begins her essay by reviewing the experiences that were the occasion for her reflections. *On Violence* is filled with references to contemporary events, newspaper articles, reports, and books, which are probably barely known or remembered today. In her brief review of the literature on violence, especially Sorel, Fanon, and Sartre, she makes some acute observations. She notes that Sorel, despite his thinking about the class struggle in military terms, “ended

<sup>3</sup> Her remarks about the Black Power movement occur early in her text when she is providing the background of experiences that are the occasion for raising “the question of political violence in the political realm” (Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1970, p. 35). But later, when she explicitly discusses racism, she writes: “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.” (Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 76).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

by proposing nothing more violent than the famous myth of the general strike, a form of action which we today would think of as belonging rather to the arsenal of nonviolent politics. Fifty years ago this modest proposal earned him the reputation of being a fascist, notwithstanding his enthusiastic approval by Lenin and the Russian Revolution.”<sup>6</sup> She discusses Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, which many radical students were hailing as the credo and justification for violence. But her main target for criticism is Jean-Paul Sartre for his “irresponsible glorification of violence.” She accuses Sartre of misunderstanding Marx in his “amalgamation of existentialism and Marxism” when in the preface to *The Wretched*, Sartre writes: “‘To shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone [...], there remain a dead man and a free man.’ [...] This is a sentence Marx could never have written.”<sup>7</sup> Sartre doesn’t realize his sharp disagreement with Marx when he declares that “‘irrepressible violence [...] is man recreating himself,’ and that it is through ‘mad fury’ that ‘the wretched of the earth’ can ‘become men.’”<sup>8</sup> She draws an unfavorable comparison between Sartre and Fanon: “Fanon himself, however, is much more doubtful about violence than his admirers [...]. Fanon knows of the ‘unmixed and total brutality [which], if not immediately combated, invariably leads to defeat of the movement within a few weeks.’”<sup>9</sup>

“It is against the background of these experiences that I propose to raise the question of violence in political terms.”<sup>10</sup> This is the opening sentence of the second section of her essay. I want to explore how Arendt deals with violence in this essay, supplementing it with observations that she makes in her other writings. I also want to work back to some of her earliest reflections on violence in the 1940s when she called for the formation of a Jewish army to fight Hitler.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 12. See Shlomo Avineri’s perceptive discussion of Marx’s views on violence in Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968: pp. 185–201.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 14, note 19.

<sup>10</sup> Although recent events were the occasion for Arendt’s essay, she was deeply concerned about how the technical development of violence in the twentieth century had reached a point where “no conceivable goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential.” This is a point that she frequently emphasized. She makes this point emphatically in the opening of *On Violence*: “These reflections are provoked by 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 revolutions, hence a century of violence which is currently believed to be their common denominator. There is, however, another factor in the present situation which, though predicted by nobody, is of at least equal importance. 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.” (Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 3).

Although Arendt tells us that there has been a reluctance to deal with violence as a phenomenon in its own right, there is nevertheless a consensus of theorists from the Left to Right to think that “violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power.” She quotes C. Wright Mills who starkly affirms: “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate power is violence.” This declaration echoes “Max Weber’s definition of the state as ‘the rule of men over men based on the means of legitimate, that is allegedly legitimate violence.’”<sup>11</sup> This well entrenched paradigm of power, which has a long history, claims that power is the rule of an individual, group, or state over others. Power is understood to be *power over*.<sup>12</sup> If this is the way we think of power, then it makes perfect sense to claim that the ultimate kind of power is violence. This is precisely the conception of power that Arendt challenges – and her point is not merely one of linguistic propriety. It goes to the very heart of her political thinking. Power and violence are not only distinguishable; they are antithetical. Where power reigns there is persuasion, not violence. And when violence reigns, it destroys power. She is critical of the question that many political theorists and philosophers have taken to be “the most crucial political issue”: “Who rules Whom?”<sup>13</sup> Arendt insists that serious political thinking requires making careful distinctions. The failure to do so indicates not only “a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it has resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to.”<sup>14</sup> And she distinguishes “power,” “strength,” “force,” “authority,” and “violence.” Each of these key terms refers to distinct and different phenomena. Although my focus will be on power and violence, let me briefly review her range of distinctions.

*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. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, “his power” also vanishes.<sup>15</sup>

“*Strength* unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity: it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Arendt notes that Voltaire had already stated that power “consists in making others act as I choose” (Ibid., p. 36).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them.”<sup>16</sup> Virgil's graphic description of Aeneas' physical prowess in his battles against his enemies is an exemplar of strength.

“*Force*, which we often use in daily speech as a synonym for violence, especially if violence serves as a means of coercion, should be reserved, in terminological language, for the “forces of nature” or the “force of circumstances” (*la force des choses*), that is, to indicate the energy released by physical or social movements.”<sup>17</sup>

*Authority*, Arendt tells us, is the most elusive of these phenomena and the term is most frequently abused. “Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed.”<sup>18</sup> Examples of authority are the relation of parent and child, teacher and student. Authority can be vested in an office – for example, in the hierarchical offices of the Catholic Church. In each case, authority may be questioned, ridiculed, and undermined.

“*Violence*, finally [...] is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it.”<sup>19</sup>

At first glance these distinctions seem arbitrary – as if she were offering stipulative definitions – without justifying them. They certainly do not correspond to the ways in which we ordinarily use these terms, and more significantly, they do not correspond to any standard uses of these terms by political theorists or philosophers. Furthermore, her characterizations are so condensed that they invite all sorts of questions. Arendt denies that they are arbitrary, although she admits that they “hardly ever correspond to watertight compartments in the real world.”<sup>20</sup> But if we are to be persuaded that they are not arbitrary then we need a fuller account of their meaning and rationale – and this is the issue I want to pursue in regard to power and violence.<sup>21</sup>

Arendt's description of power is not an isolated attempt at redefinition. Rather it links up with a whole network of concepts that she had been elaborating ever since *The Human Condition* (and even earlier): action, speech, plurality, natality, public space, isonomy, opinion, persuasion, and public freedom. Collectively, these concepts texture her vision of political life and are

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 44–45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> For a fuller account of authority see her essay “What is Authority” in Id., *Between Past and Future* [1968], Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2006.

the background for her approach to power and violence. In the opening pages of *The Human Condition* – in her analysis of the three modes of activity of the *vita activa*, labor, work, and action – Arendt states:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.<sup>22</sup>

Plurality has a distinctive meaning for Arendt: it involves individuality, distinction, and equality. Every individual brings a distinctive perspective to a common world. Plurality is rooted in our natality, the capacity to begin, to initiate action spontaneously. “To act in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin [...] to set something in motion.”<sup>23</sup> Action and speech are intimately related because it is by our words and deeds that we reveal our unique distinctiveness in the company of others. Political equality, the equality that characterizes plurality, is what the Greeks called *isonomy*. In the polis “men met one another as citizens and not as private persons [...]. The equality of the Greek *polis*, its *isonomy*, was an attribute of the polis and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of

<sup>22</sup> Id., *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 177. Arendt frequently characterizes beginning and initiating as a “miracle.” But one should be careful about drawing misleading inferences about political theology from the use of her talk about the “miracle” of beginnings. The following passage states clearly what she means: “To ask in all seriousness what such a miracle might look like, and to dispel the suspicion that hoping for or, more accurately, counting on miracles is utterly foolish and frivolous, we first have to forget the role of miracles have always played in faith and superstition – that is, in religions and pseudoreligions. In order to free ourselves from the prejudice that a miracle is solely a genuinely religious phenomenon by which something supernatural breaks into natural events or the natural course of human affairs, it might be useful to remind ourselves briefly that the entire framework of our physical existence – the existence of the earth, of organic life on earth, of the human species itself – rests upon a sort of miracle. For, from the standpoint of universal occurrences and the statistically calculable probabilities controlling them, the formation of the earth is an “infinite improbability.” And the same holds for the genesis of organic life from the processes of inorganic nature, or the origin of the human species out of evolutionary processes of organic life. It is clear from these examples that whenever something new occurs, it bursts into the context of predictable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately causally inexplicable – just like a miracle. In other words every new beginning is by nature a miracle when seen and experienced from the standpoint of the processes it necessarily interrupts. In this sense – that is, within the context of processes into which it bursts – the demonstrably real transcendence of each beginning corresponds to the religious transcendence of believing in miracles.” (Id., “Introduction into Politics,” in Id., *The Promise of Politics*, New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 111-12).

birth.”<sup>24</sup> We see more clearly why Arendt rejects the idea of political power as power of one individual or group *over* another – why she categorically rejects the idea that the crucial question of politics is “Who rules Whom?” Politics involves acting together; it is based upon human plurality and citizens encountering each other as political equals. In the public space created by acting together, citizens debate and deliberate with each other; they seek to persuade each other about how to conduct their public affairs. Persuasion involves debate among political equals, where citizens mutually seek to clarify, test, and purify their opinions. Persuasion, not violence, is what “rules” in a polity. Speech and debate can be contentious and agonistic; they do not necessarily result in, or presuppose, consensus. But politics requires a commitment to persuasion, and when we fail to persuade, we must at least agree on fair procedures for making decisions.

We deepen our understanding of what Arendt means by politics and power by probing how she integrates tangible public freedom into this web of concepts. Referring to the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment, she tells us that they had a shrewd insight into the *public* character of freedom.

Their public freedom was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public: it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space or marketplace which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.<sup>25</sup>

Public tangible freedom must be sharply distinguished from liberty. Liberty is always liberation *from* someone or something whether it is liberation from poverty, or oppressive rulers and tyrants. Liberty is a necessary condition for public freedom, but not a sufficient condition. Public freedom is a positive political achievement that arises when individuals act together and treat each other as political equals. I believe that the distinction between

<sup>24</sup> Id., *On Revolution* [1963], New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 31). Many critics of Arendt (mistakenly) think that her conception of politics is based exclusively on her understanding of the Greek polis. But Arendt was fully aware of the limitations of the Greek polis. Indeed in her “Introduction *into* Politics,” she sharply distinguished the Greek and Roman conception of politics. She attributes to the Romans a politics of foreign policy, a politics based on treaties and alliances and a new conception of *lex*. She claims that “the idea of a political order beyond borders of one’s own nation or city, is solely of Roman origin. The Roman politicization of the space between peoples marks the beginning of the Western world – indeed, it first created the Western world as *world*” (Id., “Introduction *into* Politics,” p. 189).

<sup>25</sup> Id., *On Revolution*, p. 124.

liberty and public freedom is one of Arendt's most important, enduring, and relevant political insights. Over and over again – especially after the fall of Communism in 1989 – we have had to learn the painful lesson that liberation from oppressive rulers is not *sufficient* to bring about public freedom. One of the greatest disasters of the political rhetoric that was used to “justify” the military invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies was the false belief that liberation from the oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein would initiate public freedom in the Middle East. The idea that liberation “automatically” leads to democratic public freedom is a dangerous illusion.

We can now more fully appreciate Arendt's distinctive concept of power and why she sharply distinguishes it from strength, force, authority, and violence. Power, as we have indicated, is not to be understood in a vertical hierarchical manner where it is taken to mean control or domination over another individual or group. Power is a horizontal concept: it springs up and grows when individuals act together, seek to persuade each other, and treat each other as political equals.

[P]ower comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Hence, binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence; where and when men succeed in keeping intact power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action.<sup>26</sup>

Power then, along with tangible public freedom, stands at the center of her political vision. Consequently, violence is the *antithesis* of power. “Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent.”<sup>27</sup> Violence is anti-political. So strictly speaking the very idea of “political violence” is self-contradictory. Violence is distinguished by its instrumental character; it uses tools, weapons, and sophisticated technological devices designed to multiply strength. “Violence can always destroy power: out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power.”<sup>28</sup> Violence always stands ready to destroy power and public freedom. Arendt is brutally realistic for she knows all too well that “in a head-on clash between violence and

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> Id., *On Violence*, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 53.



power, the outcome is hardly in doubt.”<sup>29</sup> And when there is a loss of power, there is an enormous temptation to resort to violence. In the “real world” we rarely find power and violence in the “pure states.” “[N]othing [...] is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form.”<sup>30</sup>

Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow. 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 its plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defense, because the danger is not only clear but also present, and the end justifying the means is immediate.<sup>31</sup>

## 2.

Suppose we stand back and ask what is Arendt doing in laying out these conceptual differences between power and violence? Is this only a theoretical exercise that displays her intellectual ingenuity? Or worse, is she guilty of doing what some of her critics claim – indulging in nostalgia for an idealized Greek polis that never even actually existed? I think that both of these caricatures are off the mark. In her own terms, she is engaging in “an exercise of political thought as it arises out of the actuality of political incidents,” the type of exercise that takes place in the gap between past and future, which she describes so eloquently in her preface to *Between Past and Future*.<sup>32</sup> Behind the immediate events of the 1960s, there is a much deeper stratum that provoked her thinking about politics, power, and violence. One of her earliest attempts to outline her vision of politics as based on plurality and the spontaneity of human action is to be found in the darkest chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she dwells on the horrors of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. “Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 46–47, emphasis added. The specter that haunts Arendt's reflections on violence and power is not only twentieth century totalitarianism but the new threat of total annihilation in the nuclear age. This unprecedented threat and the belief that politics now is both “dangerous” and “meaningless” urgently demands a rethinking of the meaning of violence and power. See the Introduction to *On Revolution* and the opening of her “Introduction into Politics.”

<sup>31</sup> Id., *On Violence*, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> Id., *Between Past and Future*, pp. 3–15.

none individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.”<sup>33</sup> The aim of totalitarian ideologies, she writes “is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself” and “the concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested.”<sup>34</sup> The aim of total domination is to destroy human plurality, individuality and spontaneity – to make human beings as human beings superfluous. This is what Arendt called “radical evil.”<sup>35</sup> It as if “dwelling on horrors,” dwelling on a new unprecedented radical evil, Arendt began her act of recovery of our humanity. Claude Lefort succinctly makes this point when he writes:

Arendt’s reading of totalitarianism, in both its Nazi and Stalinist variants, governs subsequent elaboration of her theory of politics. She conceptualizes politics by inverting the image of totalitarianism, and this leads her to look, not for a model of politics – the use of the term “model” would be a betrayal of her intentions – but for a reference to politics in certain privileged moments when its features are most clearly discernible: the moment of the Greek City in Antiquity and, in modern times, the moments of the American and French Revolutions. The moment of the workers’ councils in Russia in 1917, and that of the Hungarian workers’ councils of 1956, might also be added to the list.<sup>36</sup>

Arendt witnessed another “privileged moment” of politics in the early civil rights movement and the ant-Vietnam war movement. The generation participating in these events display “sheer courage, an astounding will to action, and [...] a no less astounding confidence in the possibility of change;” she praises their nonviolent “participatory democracy.”<sup>37</sup>

In elaborating the difference between power and violence Arendt is providing 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,” 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. Given her scathing critique of any and all appeals

<sup>33</sup> Id., *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951], New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1976<sup>3</sup>, p. 438.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 458.

<sup>35</sup> See my discussion of radical evil in Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, pp. 137-153.

<sup>36</sup> Claude Lefort, “Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political,” in Id., *Democracy and Political Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 16 and 19.

to historical necessity and her own commitment to radical contingency as well as the unpredictability of action, she 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.<sup>38</sup> As I have indicated, Arendt knows that in “real world” power and violence are rarely separated, but this is no reason to confuse these antithetical concepts. By keeping them distinct, we sharpen our critical understanding of this “real world.”

Lefort speaks about those “privileged moments” that exemplify the type of politics and power that she describes. Arendt called these moments the “revolutionary spirit” – a treasure that we are in danger of forgetting and losing.

The history of revolutions – from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest – *which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age*, could be told in a parable form as a tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a *fata morgana*.<sup>39</sup>

Arendt is frequently read as a severe critic of the modern age – and she certainly was insofar as in the modern age there is the increasing spread of bureaucracy (“the rule of nobody”) and the triumph of social and economic concerns that tend to obliterate action and politics. But at the same time, she thought that it was only in the modern age that the revolutionary spirit appeared (as distinct from older rebellions).<sup>40</sup> The sudden emergence (and disappearance) of this revolutionary spirit spells out the innermost political story of the modern age. Her analysis of the revolutionary spirit refines our understanding of the relation of politics, power, and violence. Arendt begins *On Revolution* by declaring: “Wars and revolutions – as though events had only hurried up to fulfill Lenin’s early prediction – has thus far determined the physiognomy of the twentieth century.”<sup>41</sup> The “aim of revolution was, and always has been freedom” even though the word “freedom” frequently disappears from the revolutionary

<sup>38</sup> On the cover of the 2006 Penguin edition of the *Between Past and Future*, there is a representation of the double faced Roman god, Janus. This is directly related to the gap between past and future. But the double faced Janus has symbolic significance for Arendt. Action, natality, and new beginnings are double faced. New beginnings do not necessary result to favorable outcomes. The emergence of totalitarianism in the 20th century is also rooted in the human capacity to act and initiate something new; it was an unprecedented event, a dark “new beginning.”

<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 4, emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of revolution and how it differs from rebellion, see *Id.*, *On Revolution*, pp. 21–58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

vocabulary.<sup>42</sup> Wars are much older than revolutions and they have rarely ever been bound up with freedom. Historically, both wars and revolutions “are not even conceivable outside the domain of violence.” But this close linkage with violence “is enough to set them apart from all other political phenomena.”<sup>43</sup>

To be sure, not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws – *les lois se taisent*, as the French Revolution phrased it – but everything and everybody must fall silent. It is because of this silence that violence is a marginal phenomenon in the political realm; for man, to the extent that he is a political being, is endowed with speech [...]. The point here is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence.<sup>44</sup>

No one could accuse Arendt of being innocent or naïve about the prevalence of violence in the “real world.” But if we keep in mind how she has defined power and violence, we can appreciate why she separates politics from violence – why merging them is an obfuscating confusion. Violence, although it can be lethal is mute; it is instrumental. But power requires speech and articulation. The *political* issue concerning violence is the “justification” of violence. “A theory of war or a theory of revolution, therefore, can only deal with the justification of violence because this justification of violence constitutes its political limitation; if, instead, it arrives at a glorification or justification of violence as such, it is no longer political but antipolitical.”<sup>45</sup>

When we consider revolutions in the modern age, we need to discriminate between the elements of violence and the political significance of revolutions, which Arendt calls the “revolutionary spirit.” Just as Arendt seeks to show that power must be distinguished from violence, she also wants to argue that the revolutionary spirit must be distinguished from “revolutionary violence.” Violence by itself can never bring about a revolution, even if it necessary to achieve liberation. The revolutionary spirit is the public tangible freedom that aims to create a new order (*novus ordo saeculorum*). Arendt argues that the American Revolution is the exemplar of the revolutionary spirit, not the French revolution, which turned to terror and violence.<sup>46</sup> In speaking of

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Arendt has been criticized for the historical accuracy of her portrayal of the American and French Revolutions. And she has a tendency to overemphasize the contrast by presenting an “ideal” account of the founding of the American Republic. But ever since the path breaking historical study of Gordon S. Wood’s *The Creation of the American Republic*, historians have come

the American Revolution she means the events that began in 1776 with the *Declaration of Independence* and culminated with the writing and ratification of the *Constitution*. It is the deliberation, the debates, compromises, and the ultimate ratification of the *Constitution* – the creation of a *novus ordo saeculorum* – that epitomizes the revolutionary spirit. Although initially the men of the revolution did not think of themselves as creating a revolution, but rather, as restoring basic human liberty, the founding fathers came to the realization that the “course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story never known or told before is about to unfold.” This is the distinctive mark of the modern conception of revolution. “Crucial, then to any understanding of revolutions in the modern age is that the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide.”<sup>47</sup> The network of concepts that Arendt elaborates in her political vision: plurality, natality, spontaneity, public space, participation in public affairs, testing and revising opinions with one’s peers, debate and persuasion were concretely manifested in the founding of the Republic. The “success” of the American Revolution resulted, in part, from the long pre-Revolutionary tradition of political self determination – a tradition of mutual covenants and agreements. The American Revolution is an exemplar of the revolutionary spirit because it stands “in flagrant opposition to the age-old and still current notions of the dictating violence, necessary for all foundations and hence supposedly unavoidable in all revolutions.”<sup>48</sup>

In this respect, the course of the American Revolution tells an unforgettable story and is apt to teach a unique lesson; for this revolution did not break out but was made by men in common deliberation and on the strength of mutual pledges. The principle which came to light during those fateful years when the foundations were laid – not by the strength of one architect but by the combined power of the many – was interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation; and the event itself decided indeed, as Hamilton had insisted, that men ‘are really capable [...] of establishing good government from reflection and choice,’ that they are not ‘forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.’<sup>49</sup>

to appreciate those elements of the founding of the Republic that Arendt highlights – and at times exaggerates.

<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 28 and 29.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214. This passage, the final paragraph of the penultimate chapter of *On Revolution*: “Foundation II: *Novus Ordo Saeculorum*,” sums up what is distinctive about the revolutionary spirit as exemplified by the American Revolution. It takes on special significance in light of Arendt’s opening remarks in *On Revolution* about the long and deeply embedded tradition that all politics – and especially revolutions – are based on an original violent crime. “The relevance of the problem of the problem of beginning to the phenomenon of revolution

This is not the end of the story of the American Revolution. Almost immediately, after the founding of the Republic, there was a failure to remember the revolutionary spirit, a failure that was preceded by the failure of the revolution to provide this revolutionary spirit with a lasting political institution. Thomas Jefferson was one of the few who were deeply aware of this problem, and he called for dividing the country into “elementary republics” or wards – spaces where the public freedom experienced by the founders of the Republic might be perpetuated. But nothing came of his plan. Not only the American Revolution but all subsequent revolutions have been all too quickly suppressed – frequently by professional revolutionaries. The treasure of the revolutionary spirit is in danger of being lost and has being replaced by a distorted conception of revolutionary violence.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.

is obvious. That such a beginning must be intimately connected with violence seems to be vouched for by the legendary beginnings of our history as both biblical and classical antiquity report it: Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus; violence was the beginning and, by the same token, no beginning could be made without using violence, without violating. The first recorded deeds in our biblical and our secular traditions, whether known to be legendary or believed in as historical fact, have traveled through the centuries with the force which human thought achieves in rare instances when it produces cogent metaphors or universally applicable tales. The tale spoke clearly: whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origins in crime” (Ibid., p. 20). Although Arendt was skeptical about Freud and psychoanalysis, she might have drawn upon Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* for support that the “legendary beginnings of our history” are founded on violence. For Freud, however, the “beginning” of politics and morality is patricide not fratricide. The brothers in the “primal horde” kill the father. And this “event” is repeated throughout history. Arendt’s reflections on the revolutionary spirit can be read as a radical challenge to, and refutation of, the long tradition that sees *all* politics as having its “origin” in violent crime. Her basic argument is that a proper understanding of the “problem of beginning” and the “revolutionary spirit” reveals a politics that is not based upon violence; it is a beginning based on “the combined power of the many” and is antithetical to violence. Furthermore, her sharp distinction power and violence helps to explain her profound skepticism about the concept of sovereignty, which has been associated with “legitimate” violence. Indeed, she claims “the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolishment of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same” (Ibid., p. 153).

<sup>50</sup> When Arendt praises the politics of the early stages of the world wide student movement in the 1960s, she explicitly relates this to the tradition of the revolutionary spirit. “The one positive slogan the new movement has put forth, the claim for ‘participatory democracy’ that has echoed around the globe and constitutes the most significant common denominator of the rebellions in the East and the West, derives from the best in the revolutionary tradition – the council system, the always defeated but authentic outgrowth of every revolution from the eighteenth century” (Id., *On Violence*, p. 22).

Thus far, I have been discussing the question of violence in the political realm, as Arendt herself does in *On Violence*. But violence has an even broader significance in Arendt's thinking – although even this broader conception of violence will eventually lead us back to power and politics. In the analysis of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes three fundamental activities: labor, work and action. Labor corresponds to the biological process of the human body and its human condition is life. “Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctively different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.”<sup>51</sup> Action (which has been our primary concern thus far) corresponds to the human condition of plurality. *The Human Condition* is a complex work that may be read and interpreted from a variety of perspectives, but there are, at least, two dominant strands. The first consists of an explication, a phenomenological investigation of labor, work, and action – the three types of activities that constitute the *vita activa*. The second is Arendt's narrative, the story she tells about the modern age. It is a story of a series of reversals. The major reversal is between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Whereas ancient philosophers and medieval theologians placed the highest value on the *vita contemplativa* (*bios theoretikos*) – the most divine like form of human life – there has been an inversion in the modern age – actually a displacement by the *vita activa*. Furthermore, there has been a series of reversals within the *vita activa*. For the ancients, especially Aristotle, action (*praxis*) is the highest form of human activity – the one in which human beings live ethical and political lives. Making, the work of craftsmen or artists (*poiesis*), has a lesser value than action (*praxis*). Labor, the activity necessary to sustain life is the lowest form of activity. In the modern age there is a reversal of this hierarchy where making and fabricating – the activities of *homo faber* rise to the position that was formerly occupied by contemplation. This is followed by a second reversal, a glorification of labor where *animal laborans* is victorious. Consequently, there is an inversion in the traditional hierarchy of action, work, and labor. Arendt claims that a “laboring mentality” has become so dominant and pervasive that we barely even recognize the independence of action and work.

When we examine her conception of work and fabrication, we discover what I have called her broader conception of violence. Fabrication consists in reification, in the making of things. Echoing the way in which Aristotle distinguishes between the natural world and the artificial world, Arendt stresses how *homo faber* is “the creator of the human artifice.”

<sup>51</sup> Id., *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

Material is already a product of human hands which has removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble pit of the womb of the earth. *This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and homo faber, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.*<sup>52</sup>

We must carefully interpret what Arendt is saying. When considering the political significance of violence, Arendt already stressed its instrumental character. When viewed from the perspective of power, "violence" has primarily a negative connotation; it is a threat to, and can destroy, power. But if violence is present in all fabrication then "violence" takes on a much more positive or least a more neutral connotation. Work, fabrication, making things is part of, and essential for, the human condition. It is through work that humans create a world – a world that is meant to outlast and transcend individual human lives. The category of means and end governs making. We hear the echoes of Aristotle's description of *poesis* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* when Arendt writes: "The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it [...] and that it is only a means to produce this end."<sup>53</sup> In Arendt's phenomenological investigation of labor, work, and action, she delineates the hierarchical relations among these different activities, but she also stresses their interdependence. The most important task of creating the human artifice is the creation of a stable world within which action can take place. "The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art" is the final section of her chapter on work. Work, the making things, is by no means restricted to manufacturing products for everyday life; it also involves creating works of art "the most intensely worldly of all tangible things."

Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages [...]. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and be seen, to sound and be heard, to speak and to be read.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 139, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-68.



But if creating such a world – a world that is a home for human beings and a fit place for action and speech – involves violence, then it becomes clear that violence is not intrinsically negative. It has its proper function in creating a human world, which involves a transformation of nature. Yet there is a darker face to her Janus-like discussion of *homo faber*. *Homo faber* not only refers to human beings insofar as they are creators of an artificial world; it also names a *mentality* that can dominate and permeate *all* our thinking and acting. This mentality, which gained prominence in the 17th century, is exhibited by Hobbes – “the greatest representative” of “the political philosophy of the modern age” – when he speaks about *making* an artificial animal “called a Commonwealth, or State.” “[T]he attempt to imitate under artificial conditions the process of ‘making’ by which a natural thing came into existence, serves as well or even better as the principle for doing in human affairs.”<sup>55</sup> But for Arendt, this mentality, which has had such a powerful influence right up to the present, is blind to the contingency and unpredictability of action and events.<sup>56</sup> When this mentality becomes all pervasive it has disastrous consequences because it “legitimizes” violence – especially in the founding and forming of states.

And, indeed, among the outstanding characteristics of the modern age from its beginning to our own time we find the typical attitudes of *homo faber*: his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of means-end category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; his sovereignty, which regards everything given as material and thinks of the whole of nature as of ‘an immense fabric from which we can cut out whatever we want to reweave it however we like;’ his equation of intelligence with ingenuity, that is, the contempt for all thought which cannot be considered to be ‘the first step [...] for the fabrication of artificial objects, particularly of tools to make tools, and to vary their fabrication indefinitely;’ finally, his matter-of-course identification of fabrication with action.<sup>57</sup>

Violence as instrumental has a proper role in human life because it is involved in all fabrication. And fabrication is essential for producing things needed for everyday life and for creating works of art – creating a *human world*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>56</sup> In her essay, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” Arendt argues that the mentality of *homo faber* shaped American foreign policy and led to the disastrous escalation of the Vietnam War (*Id.*, *Crisis in the Republic*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1972, pp. 3–43).

<sup>57</sup> *Id.*, *The Human Condition*, pp. 305–306. Arendt’s quotations in this passage are from Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*.

that will be a place fit for action and speech. But when the mentality of *homo faber* dominates our thinking and acting, it is dangerous for two basic reasons: It distorts reality (especially the unpredictability and contingency of human action); and it “legitimizes” violence in political life. Carried to its extreme, it entails, as C. Wright Mills declared, that “violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power.”

## 4.

I want to take up another strand in Arendt’s thinking about violence that is mentioned in *On Violence*. She briefly discusses terror, telling us: “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 [...]. Every kind of organized opposition must disappear before the full force of terror can let loose.” And in what might be taken as an implicit critique of Carl Schmitt’s famous definition of “the political” she adds:

The decisive difference between totalitarian domination, based on terror, and tyrannies and dictatorships, established by violence, is that the former turns not only against its enemies but against its friends and supporters as well, being afraid of all power, even the power of friends. The climax of terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, when yesterday’s executioner becomes today’s victim. And this is also the moment when power disappears entirely.<sup>58</sup>

These remarks about terror and violence call to mind her discussion of terror and total domination in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Terror, as so many of her concepts, has a special meaning for Arendt. She is not referring to what – especially after 9/11 – we call “terrorists.” Rather as she indicates in the above passage, terror refers to a *form of government* – totalitarianism. Arendt argues that the totalitarianism of the 20th century was unprecedented and must not be confused or reduced to traditional conceptions of dictatorship and tyranny. Totalitarianism is a regime that is based on violence and seeks to destroy all power. In her discussion of total domination, she presents a graphic descrip-

<sup>58</sup> Id., *On Violence*, p. 55. Before (and sometimes after) Arendt sharply distinguished power and violence, she frequently uses “power” in the more conventional sense of “power over” – the power by one individual or group to control other individuals and groups. For example, in chapter 12 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Totalitarianism in Power,” she describes how totalitarian regimes acquire, maintain and use their power over their subjects.

tion of the concentration and extermination camps as “the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule.”<sup>59</sup> They were “laboratories” of totalitarian regimes, where a systematic attempt was made to destroy the “juridical person,” and “the moral person” and finally “killing man’s individuality.” The aim of totalitarianism is to make human beings superfluous, to transform human beings into something that is not human.

What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested, and their shamefulness therefore is not just the business of their inmates and those who run them according to strictly ‘scientific’ standards; it is the concern of all men. Suffering, of which there has always been too much on earth, is not the issue, nor is it the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake.<sup>60</sup>

Transforming human nature itself and making human beings superfluous – is what Arendt calls radical evil.<sup>61</sup> And she concludes her discussion of “Total Domination” with a dire warning. “Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social and economic misery in a manner worthy of man.”<sup>62</sup>

In the final chapter of *The Origins*, Arendt raises the question of whether totalitarianism “has its own essence” whether there is a “basic experience which finds its political expression in totalitarian domination.”<sup>63</sup> To grasp what is distinctive about totalitarianism as a form of government we have to understand the distinctive role of ideology and terror. Ideologies, as used by totalitarian regimes, are “isms” which their adherents claim “can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise.” From an external perspective ideologies are thoroughly irrational, but they carry their own internal logic and rationality to an extreme. “Ideological thinking orders

<sup>59</sup> Id., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 441.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 458–59.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of what Arendt means by “radical evil” and how it is related to her better known phrase “the banality of evil,” see Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, pp. 137–178.

<sup>62</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 459.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 461. Arendt made changes in the various editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – sometimes adding and sometimes deleting material. “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” the final chapter of *The Origins*, is based on a paper that she wrote in 1953. She added it to the 1958 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and it is included in all subsequent editions.

facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accept premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in reality.”<sup>64</sup> Terror is closely linked to ideology. Violence is certainly not unique to totalitarianism; tyranny and dictatorship also employ the instruments of violence. But the terror that Arendt sees as characteristic of totalitarianism goes beyond more traditional uses of violence. “[T]error in totalitarian government has ceased to be a mere form of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way.” “If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness the essence of tyranny, then *terror is the essence of totalitarian domination.*”<sup>65</sup> “Under conditions of total terror not even fear can any longer serve as an advisor of how to behave, because terror chooses its victims without reference to individual actions or thoughts, exclusively in accordance with objective necessity of the natural or historical process.”<sup>66</sup> Returning to Arendt’s remarks about terror in *On Violence*, we see that, although terror employs violence, it is “beyond” violence in the sense that is the total domination characteristic of totalitarian regimes that arises when these regimes seek to destroy all power and all plurality. And “the climax of this terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, when yesterday’s executioner becomes today’s victim.”<sup>67</sup>

Although Arendt draws a sharp distinction between violence and power, and claims that power is non-violent, Arendt was not a pacifist. She certainly thought that there were times when violence is justified for political purposes. One of the most dramatic instances of this was her call for the formation of a Jewish army to fight Hitler. Shortly after Arendt arrived in New York, she started to write articles for the German-Jewish weekly *Aufbau*. Her first article dated November 14, 1941 was entitled “Die jüdische Armee – der Beginn einer jüdischen Politik?” [The Jewish Army – The Beginning of a Jewish Politics]. Before the United States entered the Second World War, Arendt called for a Jewish army drawn from volunteers all over the world to fight Hitler, “in Jewish battle formations under a Jewish flag.” She argued that the formation of a Jewish army was essential for “the struggle for the freedom of the Jewish people.” Her justification for a unique Jewish army is that “you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as.”<sup>68</sup> This reiterated her famous remark when she escaped from Germany in 1933: “If one

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 471.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*, *On Violence*, p. 55.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*, *The Jewish Writings*, New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p. 137.

is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever.”<sup>69</sup> Arendt justified the need for a Jewish army because she thought it would be the beginning of a Jewish politics – the beginning of the demand by the Jewish people that they have a vital role in the fight for freedom.

We will never get that army if the Jewish people do not demand it and are not prepared by the hundreds of thousands with weapons in hand to fight for their freedom and the right to live as a people. Only the people themselves, young and old, poor and rich, men and women, can reshape public opinion, which today is against us. *For only the people themselves are strong enough for a true alliance.*<sup>70</sup>

Arendt wrote this (and many subsequent articles calling for a Jewish army) long before she worked out her theoretical understanding of violence and power. But she clearly anticipates her later thinking insofar as she is calling for the Jewish people to act *politically* together to demand and volunteer for such an army. Although she doesn't explicitly mention “violence” it is perfectly clear that the aim of a Jewish army is to fight Hitler and the Nazis and to fight for freedom of the Jewish people.<sup>71</sup> I have cited this early example of Arendt's call for the formation of a Jewish Army to make clear that Arendt was fully aware of the complex relationship between power and violence. And there are times when violence can be politically justified in order to fight for freedom.

## 5.

Throughout her intellectual career, from the time of her earliest writings about Jewish affairs and Zionism, Arendt was controversial. The most notorious controversy was provoked by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which continued until her death in 1975 and long after. Arendt thought of herself as an independent thinker (*Selbstdenker*), and she simply didn't “fit” any the conventional academic or political labels. At a conference dedicated to her work, which she attended in 1972, Hans Morgenthau, the distinguished political scientist (and a personal friend) bluntly asked her, “What are you? Are you a conservative?

<sup>69</sup> Id., *Essays in Understanding*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1994, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Id., *The Jewish Writings*, pp. 138-139, Arendt's italics.

<sup>71</sup> In 1939, Hans Jonas, a close friend of Arendt from her student days in Germany who was then living in Palestine, also wrote an open letter calling for a Jewish army to fight “our war.” Jonas subsequently fought against the Nazis in the famous Jewish Brigade wearing the Star of David. His open letter is included as an appendix in Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions*, Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2007, pp. 167-175.

Are you a liberal? Where is your position within contemporary possibilities?" Arendt forthrightly replied:

I don't know. I really don't know and I have never known. And I suppose I never had any position. You know the left think I am conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am a maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn't care less. *I don't think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing.*<sup>72</sup>

She might have given the same reply if asked whether she was a philosopher, a political theorist, a cultural or literary critic.<sup>73</sup> Arendt simply didn't think in these terms and she certainly did not "fit" any the traditional academic professions, nor was she much concerned with dominant intellectual trends and fashions. She was not only an independent thinker but an irritating thinker. When she deals with a problem or a thinker, she frequently writes as if there is one and only one correct view. And she had strong opinions about just about everything she discussed. When she had a fixed idea about something, she would rarely budge (or consider alternative interpretations). For example, she stubbornly insisted that both Hegel and Marx substituted a philosophy of history and a doctrine of historical inevitability for genuine understanding of human freedom.<sup>74</sup> Her rhetoric is frequently essentialist. When she entitles essays such as "What is Freedom?" or "What is Authority?" she writes as if there is really one and only one correct answer to these questions. When she distinguishes "power," "strength," "force," "authority," and "violence," she doesn't say "I propose to introduce these distinction for the following reasons," but rather she presents these distinctions as if any clear thinking person will see that these refer to "distinct phenomena."<sup>75</sup> Sometimes these dogmatic pronouncements seem like sheer intellectual arrogance. She was frequently accused of exaggeration – even by sympathetic friends. In their extended correspondence, Karl Jaspers makes this accusation several times. In her letter to him dated January 22, 1952, she expressed her pique.

<sup>72</sup> M. A. Hill, *Hannah Arendt. The Recovery of the Public World*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, p. 333, emphasis added.

<sup>73</sup> In her interview with Günter Gaus, when he describes her as a philosopher, she replies: "I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers, as you so kindly suppose" (Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 1).

<sup>74</sup> I have criticized her interpretation of Hegel and Marx in Richard J. Bernstein, "Hannah Arendt: The Ambiguities of Theory and Practice," in Terrance Ball (ed.), *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

<sup>75</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 43.

'Exaggeration' – of course. 'Relationship between ideas' as you say can hardly be presented any other way. And then they are not really exaggerations either. They are products of dissection. It's the nature of thought to exaggerate. When Montesquieu says that republican government is based on the principle of virtue, he is 'exaggerating' too. Besides, reality has taken things to such great extremes in our century that we can say without exaggeration that reality is 'exaggerated.' Our thinking, which after all likes nothing better than rolling along its accustomed paths, is hardly capable of keeping up with it. My 'exaggerated' kind of thinking, which is at least making an effort to say something adequate in a tone that is, if possible, itself adequate, will of course sound wildly radical if you measure it not against reality but against what historians, going on the assumption that everything is in the best of order, have said on the same subject.<sup>76</sup>

This passage is extremely revealing about Arendt's own thinking, and it has particular relevance to her reflections on violence. When Arendt introduces her categorical distinction between violence and power, she is clearly "exaggerating" and this might be taken as a reason for dismissing her work. After all, even she admits that nothing is "more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to them in their pure and therefore extreme form."<sup>77</sup> If this is true, that what's the point of drawing such a strong distinction between them? I am inclined to reply: "That's precisely the point!" Arendt is not utopian. She doesn't think that in the "real world" power can prevail without any violence. But the point of her "exaggerated" claims is to get us to see, understand, and appreciate something that we are in danger of forgetting – that power and action are distorted when we fuse power and violence. Distinguishing power and violence enables us to discern those political "privileged moments" that have emerged almost spontaneously and which reveal the "innermost story of the modern age." What Arendt says about Walter Benjamin – in a beautiful and illuminating essay – is just as applicable to her.

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of distinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks

<sup>76</sup> Id. and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926- 1979*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1992, pp. 175-176.

<sup>77</sup> Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 47. She also writes: "To expect people, who have not the slightest notion of what the *res publica*, the public thing is, to behave nonviolently and argue rationally in matters of interest is neither realistic nor reasonable" (Ibid., p. 78).

and is dissolved what was once alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of things – as ‘thought fragments,’ as something ‘rich and strange,’ and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.<sup>78</sup>

The purpose of this “excavation” is not simply to retrieve “pearls” from the *past*, but to serve as a reminder of what is in the *present* and is still real *future* possibility. As long as the human condition does not radically change, there is a the possibility of actualizing nonviolent political power – or at least maximizing this power by acting together, testing and clarifying our opinion in public spaces, and minimizing violence. Even if we fail in this endeavor, Arendt’s “exaggerated” thinking provides critical standards for judging what we are doing and what is happening to us. Her distinctions are “products of dissection” that enable us to discriminate what we otherwise would not see if we assume that things are “rolling along” in their “accustomed paths.” And this type of thinking is what is called forth precisely because “reality has taken things to such great extremes in our century [the twentieth century] that we can say without exaggeration that reality is ‘exaggerated.’”

There are many types of violence that Arendt does not discuss systematically such as religious violence, rape, suicide bombing. And there are many questions about violence that she never asks such as why violence is glorified, or how it is related to sacrifice. But what she does say about violence and power, as well as how the violence intrinsic to work becomes dangerous when the mentality of *homo faber* dominates thinking and acting is fresh and illuminating and provides a much needed perspective for understanding the extremes of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Still one may wonder how “relevant” is Arendt’s reflections to the political realities of our contemporary age. Even if one concedes that she illuminates “extraordinary politics” and “the revolutionary spirit,” these “privileged moments” have been all too rare and brief by her reckoning. What does Arendt really have to tell us about everyday politics in this age of globalization? In her own reflections about freedom she hits upon a deep perplexity that she never quite resolved. In the concluding chapter of *On Revolution*, she argues that after the American Revolution – in the post-revolutionary thought – there was not only a “failure to remember the revolutionary spirit” but, even more important, a failure to provide for a lasting political institution for the public freedom that had been achieved in the founding of the Republic.

<sup>78</sup> Id., *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1968, pp. 205–206.



The perplexity was simple, and stated in logical terms, it seemed unsolvable: if the foundation was the aim and end of revolution then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating.<sup>79</sup>

If the deliberating involved in writing and ratifying of the Constitution exemplified a privileged political moment of political freedom, and the Constitution is supposed to “house” public freedom, then the perplexity is how to foster and encourage public freedom after the founding of the Republic. Thomas Jefferson was the Founding Father who most self-consciously struggled with this problem; and he proposed creating little wards, elementary republics – something like the early town meetings – where non-violent political power public freedom might flourish.

Jefferson himself knew well enough that what he proposed as the ‘salvation of the republic’ actually was the salvation of the revolutionary spirit through the republic. His expositions of the ward system always began with a reminder of how ‘the vigour given to our revolution in its commencement’ was due to the ‘little republics,’ how they had ‘thrown the whole nation into energetic action,’ and how, at a later occasion, he had felt ‘the foundations of government shaken under [his] feet by the New England townships,’ ‘the energy of this organization’ being so great that ‘there is not an individual in their States whose body was not thrown with all its momentum into action.’ Hence he expected the wards to permit the citizens to continue to do what they had been able to do during the years of revolution, namely, to act on their own and thus to participate in public business as it was being transacted from day to day.<sup>80</sup>

In this context Arendt sketches the idea of a council system that might serve as alternative to the modern state.<sup>81</sup> But the problem that Arendt touches on raises profound issues that go beyond the American Revolution. Whether we use the Weberian language of extraordinary and ordinary politics, or the Kuhnian language of revolutionary and normal science, the problem is how is one to preserve something of the spirit of what is extraordinary and revolutionary in everyday normal politics. How are we to foster the growth of power and minimize violence? How are we to make public freedom tangible, not only in brief historical moments, but in enduring long lasting political institutions?

<sup>79</sup> Id., *On Revolution*, p. 232.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>81</sup> See the perceptive discussion of the council system in Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 254–291.

Arendt was acutely aware of these problems and perplexities and she valiantly struggled with them. But I don't think she ever came up with a satisfactory "solution." In truth, I don't think that any thinker of the 20th or 21st century has adequately resolved the issue of the processes of "normalization" that defeat the revolutionary spirit and undermine the "privileged moments" of "public freedom." But it would be a grave mistake to dismiss Arendt's reflections on violence and power because she failed to resolve a problem and perplexity that no one else has solved – and which may indeed be insoluble.

## 6.

I would like to conclude by showing just how relevant and insightful Arendt has been for thinking and acting in the "real world." Shortly after the Hungarian uprising, she wrote one of her most enthusiastic essays. The ten day revolution, the formation of spontaneous councils, the power that grew in the streets vindicated her belief in the emergence of the revolutionary spirit against overwhelming odds. The crushing of the uprising by Soviet tanks also showed how quickly and brutally violence can destroy power. But in this 1958 article, Arendt was almost prophetic about what might happen – and did happen in 1989. Although the uprising lasted only twelve days and was completely unexpected, it "contained more history than the twelve years since the Red Army has 'liberated' the country from Nazi domination."<sup>82</sup>

If there was ever such a thing as Rosa Luxemburg's 'spontaneous revolution' – this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else, without the demoralizing chaos of military defeat preceding it, without *coup d'état* techniques, without closely knit apparatus of organizers and conspirators, without the undermining propaganda of a revolutionary party, something, that is, which everybody, conservatives and liberals, radicals and revolutionists, had discarded as a noble dream – then we had the privilege to witness it.<sup>83</sup>

The creation of revolutionary councils, were "the same organization which for more than a hundred years now has emerged whenever people have been permitted for a few days, or a few weeks or months, to follow their own political devices without a government (or a party program) imposed from above."<sup>84</sup> All sorts of councils – neighborhood councils, councils of writers and artists, student and youth councils – in Hungary were sponta-

<sup>82</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), p. 480.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 482.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 497.

neously organized, and in these councils public freedom became tangible. Arendt claims that under modern conditions, “the councils are the only democratic alternative to the party system.” The rise of the councils “was the clear sign of a true upsurge of democracy against dictatorship, of freedom against tyranny.”<sup>85</sup> Of course, the uprising was crushed almost as soon as it arose. But – especially considering the events of 1989 – Arendt’s concluding remarks of “Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution” were insightful.

Still, the danger signs [for the Soviet Union] of 1956 were real enough, and although today they are overshadowed by the successes of 1957 and the fact that the system was able to survive, it would not be wise to forget them. If they promise anything at all, it is much rather a sudden and dramatic collapse of the whole regime than a gradual normalization. Such a catastrophic development, as we learned from the Hungarian revolution, need not necessarily entail chaos – though it certainly would be rather unwise to expect from the Russian people, after forty years of tyranny and thirty years of totalitarianism, the same spirit and the same political productivity which the Hungarian people showed in their most glorious hour.<sup>86</sup>

Arendt did not live to witness the fall of Communism, but in light her reflections on the Hungarian revolution, she would not have been surprised by its “sudden and dramatic collapse.” And it is not surprising that her writings about totalitarianism, plurality, power, and politics were a source of inspiration for many of the dissident leaders who brought about the fall of Communism. When Adam Michnik, one the leaders of the Polish Solidarity movement, was in prison during the early 1980s, he was reading the works of Hannah Arendt. He was not alone in being inspired by Arendt. The fall of Communism throughout Eastern Europe – certainly the most significant political event of the last decades of the 20th century – is a dramatic instance of how power of people can spontaneously arise, grow, and even defeat the potential violence of the state. I find it deeply ironical that Arendt, who is frequently accused of being “romantic,” “nostalgic,” “utopian,” and “irrelevant” is one of the few political thinkers of our time who had a deep understanding of what might (and actually did) happen when nonviolent power grows and spreads – the power to bring about a dramatic collapse of what many had taken to be a “powerfully” entrenched violent totalitarian regime.

If there is a constant theme that runs through all of Arendt’s work, it is the need to think. In the prologue to *The Human Condition* she wrote: “What I propose, therefore is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.” And although she doesn’t thematize “thinking” in *The*

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 510.

*Human Condition*, she informs us that “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable [is] the activity of thinking.”<sup>87</sup> In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, when she sought to account for the banality of evil, she was struck by Eichmann’s inability to think. He certainly was “intelligent” enough to calculate and plan, but this is not the same as thinking. As she tells us in *The Life of the Mind*: “It was this absence of thinking – which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think – that awakened my interest.”<sup>88</sup> In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, she described her essays as “exercises in political thinking.”<sup>89</sup> She characterized the type of thinking that she practiced as “thinking without banisters” (*Denken ohne Geländer*). Thinking is an activity that must be carried out over and over again. Arendt certainly believed this about her own thinking. She insists that her reflections on power and violence should call forth further thinking; there can be no finality in the process of genuine thinking. And in her “exaggerated” thinking about violence, she has helped to illuminate the dark landscape of our times.

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<sup>87</sup> Id., *The Human Condition*, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> Id., *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1978, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> For further reflections on the meaning and role of thinking, see Richard J. Bernstein, “Arendt on Thinking,” in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.