

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1969.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975 A.D.) wrote political philosophy. A secular Jew, Arendt studied under Martin Heidegger, with whom she had an extended romance, for which she was much criticized after Heidegger supported the Nazi party. Arendt was denied tenure in the German university system because she was a Jew. Arendt fled from Germany to Paris, after being interrogated by the Gestapo. In 1941, Arendt fled from France to the United States to escape the threat of deportation to Nazi concentration camps. After the war ended, Arendt returned to Germany and worked to save children of the Holocaust. In 1950, Arendt became a naturalized American citizen. She taught at Berkeley, Princeton, Northwestern, Yale and Wesleyan. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her report of the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, suggested that Eichmann's evil was nothing more than organized thoughtlessness (Arendt coined the term "banality of evil"). Arendt was tremendously critical of Israel's conduct of Eichmann's trial. Her criticisms earned her wide animosity in the Jewish community.

- I. [Violence Today: 1969.]** No political goal warrants use of nuclear weaponry. Such devices, therefore, lie outside the course of war, as war has existed in the past. Instead, the threat of use of nuclear weapons is a pawn in possessors' high stakes game of deterrence. In all violence, the violent means tend to overmatch the goals for which violence is employed. None knows what ends will be achieved once violent means are unleashed.

War continues to exist only because without war there exists no final judge in international disputes. International promises are mere words apart from the implicit threat of force. For as long as national sovereignty means the same thing as freedom, no substitute for violence will emerge. The future in international affairs is more uncertain than we like to imagine. Our theories about what happens and why are guesses, mostly inaccurate. Such theories may put common sense to sleep.

It used to be said that war was the continuation of politics by other means. Now, it may be the case that war-making organizes society, and all else subserves war. Thermonuclear weapons place great, but unusable, power in the hands of nations. Smaller, weaker powers may well defeat the great nuclear power, if it is enfeebled by wealth and decadence.

Marxists have elevated violence. Marx himself did not. Violence preceded, but did not cause, the fall of the bourgeoisie, in Marx's tale. The untenable role of the bourgeoisie in economic production generated its collapse. Not so, for Mao. Power arrives in the barrel of a gun, according to the Chinese autocrat. Sartre, in his approach to Marxism, praises violence as man making himself, unaware of his dispute with Marx himself. For Marx turned Hegel upside down. Marxist man does not think himself into being, but produces himself into existence. All these self-creation ideas counter the facts of the human condition. They are, however, the fundament of leftist humanism.

Rank criminality can erupt into international politics. In response, global youth turned to nonviolence, encouraged by American successes in civil rights and in opposing the Vietnam War. The leftist youth were denounced, but took up jobs in America (where the jobs were), only to find that their work was turned to militaristic purposes. Universities lived by grants from the federal government. White rebels sought change without violence. Black rebels sought change, often ill-conceived, with violence. The blacks got their changes; the whites not, justifying Frantz Fanon's conclusion that "only violence pays." Many have taken up the fictional cause of the "unity of the third world" to rally supporters. The new left's political theory is wan. Councils feature prominently, without noticing that they have never worked. Marx declares such phenomena will wither away. The new left claims the moral high ground, apparently unaware that Marx dismissed such concerns. The new left also lacks supporters outside the universities. Leftist protest is not a worker's movement, but student action. The reason for the intellectual inconsistencies of the new left is uncertain, apart from participating in the general inability of liberal thought to present its ideas with consistency. The new left lionizes the idea of progress, but offers precious little to justify its faith. History may, rather, be eternal recurring circles, a series of unrelated events, or a long line of degradations from a long-lost Golden Age. The idea of progress necessarily means that time-borne injustice

reigns, as the earlier generations toil to create the mansions the unborn will inhabit. And for individuals, the sweep of history holds only individual annihilation after a brief visit upon the plain of action. The idea of Progress does, however, prescribe our future acts: improve upon the status quo. Perhaps the student rebellions show us that, though humans can be shaped by extreme deprivation or pain or propaganda, they cannot be ultimately shaped by subliminal messages and advertising in free societies. The idea of Progress can no longer guide us; it has unleashed a torrent of ill-deliberated change. The new left may argue that only violence interrupts the plodding onward of the status quo. This, however, is false. All action contains the possibility of deviation from past automatisms.

II. [Key Definitions in Understanding Political Violence.] Violence is, intellectually, an obscure phenomenon. Most political theorists seem to agree that violence is flagrant exercise of power, and that politics is seeking power to exercise legitimated violence. One should distinguish power from violence. But even among those few who do so, they still view power as a species of violence, though somewhat mitigated as compared to the raving gunman or nation bent on blitzkrieg.

Arendt notes that the view that power is violence-awaiting-its-moment is consistent with the political arguments for the absolute right of kings, the rule of oligarchies, or the rule of the best or the most (aristocracy or democracy) or the rule of bureaucracy (which Arendt characterizes as the rule of nobody, since every bureaucrat ultimately passes responsibility to another).

The penchant for conceiving power as rule over others with a violent bottom line has historical roots in Jewish-Christian conceptions of God's word as commandment, and scientific support in recent assertions of innate sociological aggression and domination instincts in humans. Some humans wish to dominate and never be dominated. More humans seek a strong man to rule them, exhibiting a deep thirst for submission and guidance.

Another equally ancient tradition about the relationship of power and violence exists. In Athens, only such laws existed as had the support of a majority of the people. Power was questioned and required consent of the ruled, which effectively made the ruled the locus of power. In this understanding, violence is a departure from legitimacy. The more violence, the less consensus. Tyranny is one against all. Mob power is all against one. Small groups can have large power when the majority is unwilling to exercise itself quashing them in order to revalidate the status quo.

Our terminology is sloppy. Power, strength, might, force, authority and violence are all reduced to simplistic equations involving who dominates whom. Arendt defines: 1) power as groups acting collectively, 2) strength as the ability of an individual to stand against the tide of opinion, 3) force as the results of physical or social energy, 4) authority as an aura inducing automatic tendency to obey without coercion, and 5) violence as instrumental activity, that is, action aimed to compel others to desist action, undertake action, or take notice of the actor. Given that power, when frustrated, so frequently devolves into violence, there is a tendency to view power as mere veiled threats of violence. A closer look at revolution reveals that power is not velvet violence.

The instruments of violence always lie immensely in favor of governments. Rebels by comparison lack weapons. The power of rebels lies not in guns, but in eroding the command of the authorities. When soldiers will not use their weapons, governments fall and rebellions prevail. All governments rely on powers other than violence alone. Governments are power in their essence, but not violence. Violence is, in its essence, instrumental. It must be justified in relation to some other value. Peace is an absolute value, as is power. Government power is the predicate of thinking about our common goals. Peace is the prerequisite to attaining those goals. Violence deviates from peace to address some aberrant need: to confront an individual or nation unresponsive to power of the common consensus, for a limited time and purpose.

Power needs no rationale, but it does need legitimacy, which derives from the conditions of its formation in the past. Violence can be warranted, but is justified on the basis of outcomes in the future. The farther in the future lies the purpose of violence, the weaker the justification for it. Violence is warranted only on the basis of clear and present dangers, not

vague fears or suspicions. Violence can destroy power, but not create it. Violence coerces obedience, but does not generate consent and so, lacks authority. When power weakens, its holders are tempted to employ violence as a substitute. When violence is employed, it reduces the power of the users. Violence defeats power-seekers.

Power legitimately employs violence sparingly, because violence erodes power's legitimacy. Violence, employed without other supports, destroys power. Therefore, "non-violent power" is oxymoronic.

III. [The Root and Nature of Violence.] Mankind will learn little of value concerning its penchant for violence from studying the animal kingdom. It is true that we have much in common with our animal cousins behaviorally. Some social science has depicted violence as an instinctive urge, the frustration of which builds energy, leading only to a more outrageous explosion on account of deferral. In this view, man as rational animal prevails. Man is an animal with reason added, and the more dangerous because of reason. This theory predicts that man will ameliorate his violent plight only by sublimating instinctual energies into useful or non-injurious activities, after heeding scientific findings. Arendt argues against these theories that violence is neither an animal passion nor unreasonable.

Violence can spring from rage. Rage is no more pathological than any other human emotion. Rage emerges most commonly in response to unwanted conditions that could be changed but have not been changed. At times, the swiftness and certainty of violence seem the only justifiable response to outrage. (Arendt parenthetically mentions Billy Budd's plight and his violent solution to its conundrum, in the Melville novel of the same name.) To cure man of such violence would be to devastate his humanity. The absence of potent emotion does not make a person rational. Equanimity and detachment can indicate not merely calm possession of oneself, but also indifference or ignorance. Emotion precedes rational responses, and is integral to reasonableness. The opposite of emotion is not reason, but indifference or saccharine sentimentality. In American race relations, blacks have meritorious grievances. It is a dodge to assert that all whites are guilty of these crimes, and leads to insupportable undifferentiated rage among African-Americans. One replaces identifiable injustice with ethereal philosophical nonsense about global racial guilt or innocence. Hypocrisy also sparks rage. We all live in a world of perceptions, some of which are ruses. Unmasking the ruse salves the rage which lies engender. When the hypocrite hides behind reason, reason cannot serve. So, violence ensues.

Death, and the threat of death, quenches the need for individual assertion. Awareness of one's mortality makes one attach one's heart to the preservation of one's group. The individual is but a heartbeat; her group lives on indefinitely. Oddly, death, as the universal equalizer, has played little role in political philosophy. Hobbes made fear of death-by-neighbor central to his social contract for a monarch of unlimited powers. Hobbes's thought is not equality before death, but rather an evasion of death altogether. Those who have praised violence (Fanon, Sorel, Lorenz, Pareto) have done so believing that violence represents renewal and expresses vital forces necessary to societal prosperity. Traditional notions of power view coercion biologically, as a force with an inner need to expand. This is dangerous thinking, because violence finds its rationale in supposed creative results. Violence, then, is an activity to be sought for its positive benefits. The organic metaphor, that violence and creation are naturally linked, leads one to glorify violence. In race matters, organic metaphors are an invitation to attack the other color, since no amount of talk can remove the pigmentation or lack thereof. But racism is not race. Racism is a habit, and therefore eradicable. Racial violence, when truly so, is based in ideology, not a potpourri of vague discomforts. The great danger [in 1969] was that black racist ideology might provoke a countering white racist ideology, leading to unrestrained war of police upon ghetto.

Self-interest is never enlightened. Asking citizens who know nothing of public matters to act with non-violent rationality concerning their self-interests is untenable. Though the shirt is close, the skin is closer, and one can be shed of neither.

Violence is rational if it achieves its end. Since we can seldom predict the long term implications of our actions, all violence must aim at short term goals. Violence can publicize wrongs. But dangers haunt violence. Violence can unexpectedly overwhelm its users' short

term goals. If violence lingers after the initial quick strike, it can change the political environment to habitual violence. If violence fails in its purpose, return to the *status quo ante* is impossible. The most likely outcome of employing violence to achieve one's ends is to create a world that is fundamentally more violent.

Bureaucracy, so necessary in a crowded, wealthy world, is rule by Nobody. There exists no person to whom one can complain and be heard. Bureaucracy is tyranny without a personal tyrant. Where bureaucracy prevents one from acting, the human condition is thwarted. Humans are born, act, and die. Birth (what Arendt calls "natality") creates the precondition for doing new things. New creatures seek novelty. Action follows natality, the freedom to do something new and follow up on it. Novel action has most suffered under modern bureaucracy.

Arendt argues that we require a new model for political participation to avoid becoming obedient, unthinking automatons. This new approach will not make violence its archetype. Violence is presently glorified because freedom of action is sorely frustrated in modern societies. Our societies have become gargantuan and unworkable. Public services are badly eroded; public needs go unmet. The very size of modern societies makes them fracture. There is a political swing in America to the Right [1969]. This political shift may be protest against bureaucratic bloat. In Europe, their social centralization experiments have failed. Identity groups are spinning off, seeking independence. Yet America walks away from its heritage of decentralization and checks and balances in favor of quasi-European centralization. We repeat the errors that the Constitutional framers fought to exclude.

Real power seeps away from monopolistic administration. Powerful governments become powerless. The American government can send men to the moon, a seeming impossibility, and cannot end a war in a small country of little significance [Vietnam]. Our inability to care for ourselves is strangely juxtaposed with our ability to work apparent miracles. As genuine power leaks from ossified authorities, the danger of violence skyrockets. Paucity of genuine power beckons gun and bomb.