

Has the Wave of Revolutions Run its Course?

Written by Opemipo Akisanya

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OPEMIPO AKISANYA, JAN 7 2015

Many of the revolutions – from the Algerian revolution to the 2005 ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine – have closely mirrored the Arendtian notion of revolution as *plural breeding grounds for political power*. But it is important to ask if Arendt’s theoretical framework has ‘run its course’ and whether it would be useful for critiquing modern revolutions, such as those of the Arab Spring. Importantly, is the cause of the poor (social question) so separate from the notion of political freedom in contemporary revolutions? It is dubious to ventriloquize the dead to comment posthumously on current affairs. But given her thoughts in *On Revolution*, if she were alive today she may argue that such episodes of true revolution or action in concert exists in the recent Arab Spring revolutions or the failed (or failing) Syrian revolution, taking the form of spontaneous arising councils e.g. the Syrian Rebel Council. Contrary to Arendt, I argue that answering the ‘social question’ is necessary to a fuller understanding of revolutions.

The Arendtian Conception of Revolutionary Violence

For Arendt a ‘true’ revolution has certain central elements: a spontaneous council system, the establishing of and location of, freedom in action and the potential for a wholly new system of government. It is one in which there is no violence but one in which a group of individuals affirm their plurality by exercising positive participation or ‘action in concert’ and assert themselves nonviolently into a “Civil body Politick”. Many revolutions, such as the Hungarian revolution against Soviet rule, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the Georgian Rose Revolution and the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, were largely non-violent and vindicated Arendt’s conception of power and its relationship with violence. Violence is a perversion of revolutions and as long as it plays a predominant role in revolutions, the former is antipolitical and the latter occur outside the political realm, despite their enormous role in recorded history (2006: 9).

However, it would be a misunderstanding of her theory that she advocates a revolutionary pacifism in the manner of Gandhi. In fact, she is not entirely opposed to the use of violence. But she warns that violence is only acceptable and politically justifiable where change occurs in the sense of establishing a new system of government (2006: 89).

Crucial to any understanding of the Arendtian revolution is the idea that the experience of a new beginning and freedom should coincide. Only where novelty[1] is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution (2006: 32-38). Therefore, a conception of freedom is necessary for the understanding of revolution. For Arendt, to be free is to be unobstructed from taking positive action in concert with others. Freedom’s actual content is participation in public affairs or admission into the public realm (2006: 22). She laments the focus and tendency of modern revolutions to draw upon the model of the French Revolution, understanding revolution in terms of irresistible historical necessity, and the conspicuous absence for the deep concern with new forms of government that was characteristic of the Arendt-favoured American Revolution and present during the initial stages of the French Revolution (2006: 46-50). I will say more about the ‘irresistible necessity’ in the next section, where I consider the ‘social question’.

The Social Question: Modern Revolutionaries Making Poor Decisions

Arendt sharply opposed any admixture of the social and the political realms, fearing that the integrity of the latter (whose aim should be the exercise of freedom) would be adulterated and spoiled by all kinds of other social aims,

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such as heralding a civil society and guiding a modern economy (2006: xxiii).

According to Arendt, violence and irresistible necessity (not freedom) became the focal revolutionary thought of the French revolutionaries and their successors. This necessity is vividly displayed, in the French revolution when the poor, driven by their bodily needs, burst on the scene, and in modern revolutions when a plurality of multitudes are encompassed in the “supernatural body of one superhuman” and driven by one irresistible will. Arendt simply refers to this irresistible necessity as the social question i.e. the existence of poverty as a dehumanizing force. It is exemplified by the ‘absolute dictate of necessity’, where revolutionaries subject to the dictate of their bodies drove on and inspired the French Revolution and eventually unleashed terror that led to its doom, as freedom was usurped by necessity (2006: 49-50). On this point, it would have been insightful to know Arendt’s thoughts on the battle of Algiers.

Critical Film Review: The Battle of Algiers

The Battle of Algiers is a film released in 1966 which reconstructs the 1954-1962 Algerian struggle for independence. The film was based on the memoirs of Saadi Yacef and was directed by Gillo Pontecorvo,[2] who uses grainy black and white pictures, and voiceovers to give the film a newsreel feel. In addition to the suspense-filled soundtrack and use of non-professional actors, including the main protagonist – Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag) – he is able to establish what he describes as a ‘dictatorship of truth’.[3]

The film follows the FLN and Ali La Pointe, an unemployed trickster who was previously convicted of Army draft dodging and insulting a policeman. In an early scene, La Pointe is arrested again for illegal trading and whilst in prison, he witnesses the execution of an Algerian prisoner.[4] This causes him to join the FLN, where he quickly rises through the ranks to become a leading member. The FLN story in *the Battle of Algiers* opens and ends in 1957 with a FLN member who had given in to French paratroopers’ torture and forced to wear their military camouflage in order to disclose the whereabouts of La Pointe.

The film picks up the pace on the theme of violence when the FLN carries out a series of attacks on the police, resulting in a crackdown on La Casbah. Many times the use of violence in the earlier scenes was only indirectly related to the FLN’s revolutionary aims. For instance, some of the attacks on the police were simply to acquire more weapons for their revolutionary cause. However, the bombing of the Arab quarter in Algiers by four Pro-French Algerian and French men helped to legitimize the cause of the FLN, making it easier for the FLN to assume responsibility for the moral welfare of the Algerian people.[5] I am now going to consider the film in light of Arendt’s arguments on the relationship between revolutionary violence and political society.

“Acts of violence Don’t Win Wars. Neither Wars Nor Revolutions.”

Arendt argues political power, which is generated by “action in concert” is the opposite of violence. She asserts that when regimes lose political power i.e., the cooperation or support of the people, their power evaporates and any efforts to starve off defeat though might succeed for a while, but will not last. Worse still, the violence may hasten their demise. After the French paratroopers were sent into La Casbah, the French government started to lose the cooperation of the Algerian people. In an exchange with the press, a journalist questions Colonel Mathieu on the use of violence as a method of control by the state, to which the French colonel responds, “Is France to remain in Algeria? If your answer is yes, you must accept all the necessary consequences.”

However, Arendt was optimistic that in the presence of overwhelming indoctrination a yearning for freedom and truth will rise out of man’s heart and mind forever (Arendt, 2006: xv-xx). Even after the battle of Algiers was lost by the FLN, the end of the film showed that a general uprising began two years later, which led to the independence of Algeria. The Algerian struggles were broadly in accordance with Arendt’s conception of a revolution: the FLN was a revolutionary group that espoused action in concert among equals ready to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs and sought the cooperation of the Algerian majority. Thus, depriving the French repressive regime of legitimacy and the ‘force of opinion’, which ultimately upended the French, even after the FLN had been crushed.

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But it is important to note that Arendt does not believe that violence, as adopted by the FLN, can ever form the basis of a political community. She argues that power, not violence, is the essence of government. A similar argument was made by the leader of FLN, Ben M'hiri (BM) in his discussion with Ali La Pointe (ALP) on the use of strikes as a means of 'non-violence' to raise international awareness of their cause for freedom, arguing, "acts of violence don't win wars. Neither wars nor revolutions. Terrorism is useful as a start. But then, the people themselves must act. That's the rationale behind this strike, to mobilize all Algerians to assess our strengths." For M'hiri, it is clear that even perceived 'non-violent' acts could also have violent consequences. As with Walter Benjamin, perceived non-violent actions and non-actions such as the FLN-officiated marriage ceremony between Mahmud and Fatiha, and strikes or organised labour, may be employed for law-making.

Colonel Mathieu, a composite character that Pontecorvo designated as 'Philosopher-in-Chief' for the French colonizers, argues for the law-making powers of violence in response to the critical nature of the press on the wanton use of violence by the French paratroopers:

[But] that's where we run into the maze of laws still in force as if Algiers were a holiday resort and not a battlefield. We have requested a free hand but it's hard to obtain. In our situation, humane conditions can only lead to despair and confusion... So we need an occasion that will justify our intervention

However, this is not law-making in the strict Arendtian sense, which may be interpreted as the act of establishing power or changing a political system through violence (Benjamin, 1986: 281).

Thus one may argue that the battle of Algiers was for the most part, a "true" Arendtian revolution. The FLN was a largely spontaneous group, whose main aims were to promote independence from colonialism and freedom and, importantly for Arendt, establish a new system of government. The FLN's fate closely mirrors Arendt's observation of the Hungarian Revolution, which was similarly extinguished but successfully dealt the Soviet Union a body blow. To paraphrase Arendt, 'the head on clash between the French paratroopers and the resistance of the Algerian people is a textbook case of a confrontation between violence and power. To substitute violence for power can bring victory but the price is very high, for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power' (Arendt, 1970: 52).

Is the Arendtian Conception Still Relevant?

As I have shown, applying Arendt's theory on revolutions has been useful for critiquing *the* Algerian revolution, which was contemporary to her time of writing. But it is important to ask if Arendt's theoretical framework has run its course and whether it would be useful for critiquing modern revolutions such as the Arab Spring revolutions. Importantly, is the cause of the poor (social question) so separate from the notion of freedom in contemporary revolutions?

For if revolution only aims at the guarantee of political freedom and a new political system, then it would have missed its aim at freedom. It would have been successful – as the universal suffrage was in acquiring political rights and creating a new political system – without acquiring any real economic power. Furthermore, if we are to take freedom seriously enough, we must acknowledge the role of economic power in allowing people to participate in the political realm, ie, their freedom. Many of the Arendtian revolutions that ignored the social question and aimed at establishing conditions of freedom have been subjected to new counterrevolutions (2006: xv).

Furthermore, Arendt envisioned that revolutionary councils would serve as embryos of what might become a new form of government, whose aim would be to foster the multiplicity of opinions and encourage active participation in politics exhibited in the revolutions. However, this is one hope of the Arendtian concept that went largely unfulfilled and remains so in modern revolutions, where the councils are usurped by better organized and better funded political parties with singular aims such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (2006: xxiv). She argues that the French revolution model, which concerns itself with the state of *les misérables* i.e., solving the social question of relieving the misery of the poor, is a mistaken approach that propelled the revolution to its eventual failure. (2006: xv).

Crudely put, the fight for political freedom is the good and rational fight whilst the fight for solving the social question

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is the bad and irrational fight driven by the passion of compassion (2006: 69). However, one may argue that political freedom and poverty are incompatible. Although it was Marx that first articulated this conclusion and argued that mass poverty can be interpreted in revolutionary terms as an uprising for the sake of the political freedom, it is possible to accept this argument without being accused of Marxism or other negative anti-capitalist labels that Arendt would have rejected based on her experience of McCarthyism in the US (2006: xx)

But Arendt may counter that the social question has been employed as a '*dues ex machina*' i.e., used to justify the rationally unjustifiable (2006: 4). She acknowledges the enormous role the social question has played in revolutions, arguing that tyrants in history have risen to power by exploiting the desire of the poor for equality of condition. However, the social question only began to play a revolutionary role in the modern age when the French revolutionaries began to doubt the inherence of poverty in the human condition. She argues that the French revolutionaries were more concerned with changing social conditions than changing the structure of the political realm (2006: 15). Prior to the social exploits of the American colony, old Europe held that the distinction between rich and poor was natural. Furthermore, the social question played hardly any role in the course of the American Revolution as it had been solved prior to the Declaration of Independence (2006: 12-14).

This seems an improbable hagiography of the American Revolution, going by its opening claims: "taxation without representation is tyranny", which is in respect to the demand for political and economic rights (Smith, 1998: 21-23). In addition, the American Revolution was concerned with the freedom of the people and participation in the political realm, so far as these aims were defined within restrictive socio-economic terms, as free white male adult property and slave owners (Greene, 2000:102).

According to Arendt, the reason for the success of the American Revolution and the failure of the French Revolution is that the social question, specifically the predicament of poverty, was absent from the former but ubiquitous in the latter. The French Revolution was predicated on the Robespierrian belief in the irresistibility of violence coupled with the Hegelian belief in the irresistibility of necessity (2006: 104). Despite the distinction between the rich and poor, the poor in America were not 'miserable', thus the problem they posed was political not social: it concerned the form of government, not the order of society (2006: 58).

But it is not coincidental that many of the founding fathers were rich white men, some of who owned slaves. Contrary to Arendt's belief, the social question was present in the American Revolution. Even though it was hidden in the abyss of slavery, it was existent for the practical purposes of maintain the pre-colonial status quo that Arendt condemns the French Revolution for. As to her claims that the American Revolution is distinctive from the French and other revolutions that followed, each revolution has its distinctively character, but significantly, the American Revolution was (uniquely) a *settler revolt* (2000: 100). As during the colonial period, political authority remained in the hands of the predominant groups among the existing settler population (2000: 101).

Contrary to Arendt's view on the state of America post-revolution, Greene argues that colonial British Americans subscribed to the idea of the political economy i.e. that society was anterior to government, with the latter promoting the ends of civil society and 'facilitating the pursuit of happiness by the individuals' in that society. Or as James Wilson puts it, "government was the scaffolding of society" whose purpose was to "protect and improve social life" (Greene, 2000: 93-99).

For whatever Arendt argues has gone wrong in the coinage of 'political economy' by Marx and his persuasive misappropriation of the term, it is self-evident and beyond doubt that political and economic power within a national and international context are largely interwoven. In many of the Arendtian revolutions, the movements led to political change but many of the processes were reversed due to lack of socio-economic freedom. Arendt's dismissal of Marx's model argument for the political economy as the relic of an 'ancient institution of slavery', which holds true only for the early stages of capitalism and is dependent on its historical rather than scientific content suggests, alas, her fallibility and possible short-sightedness (2006: 52-53). According to Berlin, those who are usually able to partake in the political realm are those who are free of all the worries connected with life's necessities.[6] So it may be that in poorer developing countries, the struggle to grow out of poverty requires the suspension of the strict notion of Arendtian revolution, for the sake of political economic freedom.

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Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to give an exposition of Arendt's conception of a revolution, applied it to the Algerian struggles as dramatized in the Battle of Algiers. I have also raised concerns that staying true to the Arendtian concept in its truest form is problematic for understanding modern revolutions such as the Arab Spring revolutions. As a result, this issue would need to be explored further.

Despite the brilliance and continuing relevance of Arendt's theory in dissecting and understanding contemporary revolutions, to its detriment the social question was largely ignored. Revolutions have outgrown the strict Arendtian conception of political freedom as justification. Many latter day Arendtian revolutions such as the South African anti-apartheid movement, the Ukrainian and Polish revolutions were largely driven by the social question. Freedom may be understood in political terms but it may also be defined in socio-economic terms, which suggests a different understanding and implication for revolutions. It should become almost axiomatic – even in the context of Arendtian revolutions – to understand economic and social freedoms are more often than not, intertwined with political freedoms.

Arendt rightly predicts that even if we reach a point where war is eliminated, revolutions will remain. Furthermore, the successful would be those who understand revolution, while those who put their faith in traditional power politics and wars would find they have become masters in a 'useless and obsolete trade'. However, her prophetic powers appear limited when she suggests that expertness in revolution cannot be replaced or countered with expertness in counterrevolutions. The Egyptian crisis, which I don't enough space to explore, seems to suggest that an understanding of counterrevolution can save the losers in a seemingly lost revolution. Thus, suggesting that counter to Arendt's quip, De Maistre's statement that 'the counterrevolution will not be revolution in reverse but the opposite of revolution', is more than empty witticism (2006: 8).

To conclude with the titular question, Arendt's revolution has not completely lost its course but the social question is necessary for a fuller understanding of revolutions.

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[1] Arendt argues for a reluctant rather than enthusiastic understanding of novelty. The French and American Revolutions were played in their initial stages by those who were firmly convinced that they would do no more than restore an old order of things – to borrow the etymological or scientific definition of revolution – that had been disturbed and violated by the despotism of absolute monarchy or the abuses of colonial government (2006: 34). Tocqueville argued 'one might have believed the aim of the coming revolution was not the overthrow of the old regime but its restoration (*L'Ancien Regime*, Paris, 1953, vol. II, pp. 72)

[2] Yacef was a former leader of Algeria's FLN, who also starred in the movie, and Gillo Pontecorvo had previously led the communist resistance movement in Italy against the fascist regime

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[3] In a documentary, Pontecorvo said he had taken these creative decisions so as to create a 'dictatorship of truth'. Different groups have used the film to gain an insight into the operations and challenges of revolutions, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.

[4] According to Pontecorvo the beheaded prisoner had previously being on death roll and was cast to channel the emotions he had felt when he was initially handed the death sentence.

[5] Jaffar speaking to La Pointe, talks about the need to organise better by 'cleaning the house' i.e. organise the FLN first before the country. In assuming responsibility for the moral welfare of the Algerian people, the FLN banned the sale of alcohol, drugs and prostitution.

[6] An important debate surrounding the conceptions of negative freedom is characterized by the analogy of the Oxford Don and the Egyptian Peasant in Isaiah Berlin's seminal work, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Berlin argues that what constitutes freedom for an Oxford don differs in degree rather than type, from that which an Egyptian peasant sees as freedom. His argument is that the Liberal idea of spreading political freedom around the world is fantastical and an Egyptian peasant is more likely to cherish basic freedoms like food, cloth and shelter than, the political liberty brought about by democratic principles. So an Egyptian peasant is more likely to feel his freedom is being interfered with when someone's actions mean he cannot fill his stomach than when his freedom to vote is curtailed. Berlin argues that after this basic freedom has been met; the peasant would then begin to consider the infringement to his personal liberty.

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Written for: Dr Audra Mitchell
Date Written: January 2014*