

# Can the Work of Hannah Arendt Help Us Understand Contemporary Conflicts?

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THOMAS RICHARDS, JUL 26 2015

### To What Extent Can the Work of Hannah Arendt Help Us in Understanding Contemporary Conflicts?

The work of Arendt, while certainly useful in understanding a definition of violence within conflict, can be applied only inaccurately to contemporary conflicts. Largely a theoretical or philosophical justification of violence rather than a useful application of theory, *On Violence*, arguably the most relevant of Arendt's work to contemporary conflict, is inadequate in helping to understand the conflict of today, certainly compared with the thought of many other thinkers. The paradoxical and way power is considered by Arendt, and the implications of Arendt's ideas make applying her concepts to modern conflicts problematic at times. However, there is value in many of the arguments and definitions given in *On Violence*. This essay will attempt to identify how Arendt's work can help understanding conflict by applying and comparing her work to contemporary conflicts – with varying success.

#### Arendtian Theory

Arendt's *On Violence* contributes to the understanding contemporary conflict primarily through its redefinition of related concepts chiefly being power and violence, as well as terror. For Arendt, power is effectively a mandate for an actor to take action – it is in effect the political capital that can be fostered by democracy or popular support. Arendt writes of the idea that states need power to be able to sustain violent actions (Arendt 1972, 143) and that the use of violence erodes this power. Violence is action taken to forcefully coerce support from a group. For Arendt, "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy . . . Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it" (1969 p. 56). Violence can be committed without power or popularity, indeed, "Violence, we must remember, does not depend on numbers or opinion but on implements" (Arendt 1969, p. 53). While violence can be a force for change – leading to the situation where "Politically, loss of power tempts men to substitute violence for power" – it is inevitably unproductive. Arendt maintains the idea that "...the distinction between violent and non-violent action is that the former is exclusively bent upon the destruction of the old and the latter chiefly concerned with the establishment of something new". Terror is used to describe the state of government completely supported by violence. "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" (Arendt, 1969, p. 122).

Arendt is right to point out that the "old verities about the relation between war and politics or about violence and power have become inapplicable" (1969), and her ideas on the nature of violence can be applied with some success not just to states but actors, be they groups such as separatists, governments or indeed individuals. Indeed, the recognition of power as a population which can "act in concert" suggests factors such as ideology and norms can be applied to the study of contemporary conflict. However, despite the significant differences of thinking outside of realist state-based violence, Arendtian theory still relies overwhelmingly on a structuralist assessment of the nature of conflict. Breen illustrates this well when he writes, "instead of transcending realism's assumptions she in fact reproduces them in her ontology of the human condition. Reproducing them, she also gives veiled yet concrete sustenance to the realist worldview" (Breen, p. 14, 2007).

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It is not only in realist theory that Arendt simultaneously rejects and adopts in her own work. Arendt quite rightly rejects Hegelian theoretical concepts – the idea of inevitable progress and that “we need only march into the future” as she writes her Marxist counterparts rely on. However, as Finlay points out, her understanding of conflict is littered with “strands of Marxist thought” even as “Marx himself had said little to indicate that he saw violence as essential to revolutionary change” (p. 28, 2009). The almost determinist assumption that technological improvements in weaponry would “permit one man with a pushbutton at his disposal to destroy whomever he pleases” (Arendt, 1969), and that the improvement of “implements” has and will continue to be “especially marked in warfare”, while supposedly free of realist and Marxist assumptions, finds itself remarkably similar in conclusion.

## The Paradoxes of Arendtian Definitions

Most of the criticism arises arguably from the definitions which Arendt uses in discussing violence. As Ayyash writes, “Violence cannot be captured within conceptual frameworks such as Arendt’s and Fanon’s, wherein violence must only play a specific role within a rigidly bordered theoretical region” (p. 352, 2013). While Arendt’s interpretation of conflict is one which avoids a state-centric approach – and is right to incorporate somewhat concepts such as culture and ideational factors in the understanding of conflict, it remains reliant too much on systematic considerations, constructing her own structure of international conflict. Arendt approaches much from the right direction – considering the psychological reaction of those with power in reacting to or instigating violent conflict however statements such “...impotence breeds violence, and psychologically this is quite true. Politically, loss of power tempts men to substitute violence for power” while incorporating some psychological justification, limits itself to the problematically applicable Arendtian system.

Arendt’s distinction between power and violence raises certain issues both theoretically and in applying her definitions to contemporary conflict. The dismissal of violence as illegitimate in all ways – and yet justifiable in cases such as revolution is at times, as Ayyash (p. 342, 2013) writes, is “Paradoxical”. Indeed, in contemporary conflict outside abstract theory violence and politics are often harder to distinguish. As Swift (p. 358, 2013) writes “the problem of her theory is often seen to lie in the limits of her normative claims for a politics cleansed of violence”. A distinction between politics or power, and violence is, in many conflicts, often impossible to distinguish. Habermas (p. 18, 1977) rightly criticised Arendt’s association of strategic action both with force or violence and with instrumental action – as Swift writes, it is “both unrealistic and hasty in its effort to reduce all strategy to force” (2013, p. 28). The reduction of violence and power into abstract and distinct concepts does not form a solid theoretical basis on which to understand conflict. As Penta writes, “Arendt’s discussion of power can be seen to be informed almost entirely by categories of language, more specifically, of language understood according to a hermeneutic paradigm” (p. 212, 1996). Arendt’s understanding of power as essentially a result of discourse is difficult to maintain as separate from the real act of violence. Considering this, with Arendt’s claim that Violence “can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate” (1969, p. 52), there are certain issues in discerning how it can be considered justifiable, as will be elaborated on later.

As we see, violence and power are arguably better considered interconnected concepts – “...violence and politics are not two separate entities; rather, they form a continuum in which relations of domination and power are established, but also continuously resisted, modified, inverted, and negotiated” (Ayyash, p. 354, 2013). These definitions leave the roots of conflict unaccounted for. Arendt’s definition of violence as distinct, her clarification that “Power and violence are opposites” (Arendt, 1969 p. 56) and the claim that the roots of violence arise only from historical violence is unhelpful in understanding the justifications for conflict. As Finlay writes, for Arendt there is a certain “reluctance to regard violence as something which can occur *within* politics” (2009, p. 30). As well as this, there are issues with the nature of violence being “instrumental” when elaborating the origin of conflict. As Finlay writes, Arendt’s instrumental violence relies on how “the permissibility of violence relates to its origins as distinct from its ends” (2009, p. 28). However, the clarification that for violence, “Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future” (Arendt, 1969, p. 52), as Finlay writes, leads to the situation where “with an eye on historical experience even instrumental justifications are to be regarded sceptically; the justice of violence has nothing to do with its origins” (2009, p. 30) There is, to some extent paradoxical support for revolutionary violence and condemnation of that of established governments. As Finlay writes, if the “physiologically necessary consequence of violent oppression and exploitation is counter-violence by colonial subjects, then the justice of that

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violence could be seen as the result of legitimate origins" (2009, p. 97). Violence cannot be considered primarily a result of historic origins – and the definitions described cannot account for unseen conflict as it arises.

## The Application of Arendtian Concepts

Despite some of the paradoxical limits of Arendt's definitions, we can see Arendt's power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (Arendt 1972, 143), being usefully applied to some extent in the role of popular opinion in contemporary conflict. The recent popular uprisings in the Middle East are relevant when thinking about the relationship between violence and 'power' as well as the legitimization and instrumentalism of violence. Thinkers such as Çubukçu (2013) continue Arendtian thought in regards to the 2011 Libyan conflict, raising the questions: "Was foreign military intervention ever a legitimate means to overthrow a repressive regime? Was foreign intervention a legitimate means when requested by "national" revolutionaries?" (p. 53, 2013) – Issues which Arendt's definitions of violence fail to address. While many problems arise from the abstract theoretical nature of Arendt's theory, we can only tenuously apply some Arendtian concepts to contemporary conflict.

Arendtian assumptions about the nature of violence, primarily that it erodes in legitimacy with unnecessary use is visible somewhat in international law regarding contemporary interventions. The Arendtian thought on the instrumental legitimacy of violence is surely reflected in international law with the existence of principles such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – indeed, Arendt's commitment to violence in the short term – a loss of legitimacy as violence continues beyond necessary – holds some value in how to think about contemporary conflict. In recent years foreign intervention in domestic conflict has certainly been perceived as being a successful legitimate intervention if violence is limited in scale and intensity – and with some justification. The precautionary principles within "Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty" clarify that intervention must adhere to limits of violence:

"Proportional means: The scale, duration and intensity of the planned military intervention should be the minimum necessary to secure the defined human protection objective.

Reasonable prospects: There must be a reasonable chance of success in halting or averting the suffering which has justified the intervention, with the consequences of action not likely to be worse than the consequences of inaction." (ICISS, 2001, XII)

Arendt's understanding of violence is not only visible in attitudes of international law, but also within Arendt's ideas on the origins of violence. Simplistically the idea that violent means lead inevitably to violent end have some contemporary examples – Arendt's ideas of violence as historically recursive has some similarity to the concept of "blowback". As Amoureux writes "Means flow into other means in an indefinite and often indistinguishable chain of intention and action. The concept of 'blowback' captures this confusion, where foreign policy strategies that are 'intended' to fight an enemy on one occasion later provide the grounds for violence directed back at the self in a way that is unintended and unforeseen." (p. 72, 2014). Amaya-Akkermans (2012) uses the case of violence in Lebanon and Syria to illustrate the spread of violence in Arendtian terms. As Panitch has written, blowback and continued violence has marred the U.S involvement in the Middle East for decades, and *the possibilities of 'blowback' are visible everywhere*" (2003, p. 233).

However, the resort to oppression and violence by governments when without power, as Arendt postulates is certainly visible within contemporary conflict, however the roots and causes of civil conflict are arguably inadequately explained. The "Instrumental potential of violence in relation to politics", as Finlay (p. 27, 2009) describes this, is clear in the actions of rogue states and governments in civil conflict. We know as public support for the Ukrainian government faltered in 2013 that violence was unsuccessfully employed to avoid regime change (Buckley, 2014). Korostelina takes an Arendtian approach to the early Ukrainian violence when she characterizes the conflict as a result of a "total absence of civil society organizations" (p. 44, 2013) and a population not "in concert". It is certainly right to think in terms of norms and ideational concepts as a cause for conflict, however the relationship between this and the use of instrumentalist violence cannot be properly understood, given the distinction given to violence.

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When it comes to applying Arendtian attitudes towards technology to contemporary conflict, despite Arendt's assumptions that technology would lead inevitably to a state of terror, it is still far from inevitable. Arendt's assumption that "the development of robot soldiers, which would eliminate the human factor completely and, conceivably, permit one man with a pushbutton at his disposal to destroy whomever he pleases could change this fundamental ascendancy of power over violence" (Arendt, 1969) cannot occur given the absolute nature of Arendt's concepts. While admittedly not free from human interaction completely, the ability to deploy strategies in which the "constant threat of 'bolt from the blue' attacks will frustrate opponents into surrender" (Sauer, p. 372, 2012) is a reality in many conflicts today. While there are some scholars who suggest drone warfare has allowed an unprecedented level of state violence – such as Shaw, who writes of how "the drone strikes in Pakistan are much harder to imagine in terms of identifiable "goals," since the justification for the administration of violence is either vague, limitless, or classified... contemporary assassination is tautological: dangerous individuals are killed because they are dangerous individuals" (p. 231, 2014), Arendt's conception of a complete state of terror – one without popular support – cannot exist because of Arendt's flawed conception of power. While Arendt is willing to concede that "No government exclusively based upon the means of violence has ever existed", it is arguably equally true of a state of power given the distinct definitions used.

## Conclusion

While at the same time criticizing "irresponsible and grandiose statements of these intellectuals" (1969), Arendt herself arguably falls under the same criticism. While in context this appears about Fanon and Sorel's justification for violent Marxist revolution, the paradoxical basis of Arendt's argument – which at times support revolutionary action and simultaneously condemn action by governments, and the relegation of certain forms of power in the semantic separation of certain forms of power to "violence" are as problematic in being applied to real cases of policy as her contemporaries. Today, by no fault of her own many of Arendt's examples are outdated, however even considering the ideas in the abstract, or in relation to the issues of the time, many are better understood through alternative means. Arendt is too quick to dismiss strategic considerations which inevitably entail violence, making the impossible distinction between violence and politics. While some of the issues which Arendt raises within her description of power and violence are undoubtedly relevant – and potentially useful for those who would investigate them more thoroughly – the same themes and actions are found elsewhere in the study of contemporary conflict. *On Violence* is itself limited in how far it can analyse conflict within a theoretical paradigm. As Crick scathingly wrote of *On Violence* "It is both very abstract and very immediate to attack the view that violence can be justified as a necessity of power, or that all power should be attacked as necessarily involving violence. And how naive, too, to see oppression as depending always on violence" (p. 365, 2012).

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