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OVERPOWERING VIOLENCE. HANNAH ARENDT

Abstract¹

There is no novelty in saying that violence has always played an enormous role in human affairs. Nobody engaged in thought about history and politics can argue about this statement. Nevertheless, Hannah Arendt observes that, surprisingly, violence has been seldom singled out for special consideration. Even if it was Clausewitz who had said that war is *the continuations of politics by other means* or the more known Engels, who defined violence as *the accelerator of economic development*, the emphasis was not mainly on the concept of violence but more on politics and economics. However violence was always there and therefore it was taken for granted and therefore it was neglected. In this respect Hannah Arendt's aim in her essay *On Violence* is to throw light upon the concept of violence as a concept in itself, distinct from other notions and related with the political issues of her time.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, violence, politics, political theory, power

1. A glance upon the past

A look over some past thinkers is requested to be done in order to clarify which was exactly the role of violence in history. Arendt rejects for example Machiavelli's belief that violence is necessary for the rebuilding of the world. She also pays attention to Karl Marx. The German philosopher had been aware of the importance of violence in history but, as Hannah Arendt observes, this role was just secondary. More important for Marx, the collapse of the old society was caused by its inherent contradictions. The rise of a new society was preceded, but not caused by violent outbreaks.²

Even the leftist humanist idea that man creates himself didn't have

¹ *Acknowledgement:* This work was supported by the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007–2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646]

² Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the republic*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 89.

the violence as the basis. And this is strange because all the notions of man creating or “producing” himself contains a rebel attitude against the human condition. Nevertheless, Karl Marx still didn’t focus on violence and sustained that it is through *labor* that man produces himself whereas for Hegel the idealistic concept of *thought* was the thing through which man creates himself.

Arendt sustains that violence remained just a secondary aspect in the history of ideas and it didn’t become an abstract notion. In her opinion, the weak point was that “violence was taken for granted and therefore neglected; no one questions or examines what is obvious to all.”³ Even if they worked with concepts like *labor* or *thought* as giving birth to a new society, to a changed human being, the thinkers before her were not aware of the fact that in fact what they supported was the idea of violence as main engine in social affairs.

Shaping her view on violence in the public realm by positioning herself against thinkers like Machiavelli, Marx or even Sartre who claimed that violence is essential in man recreating himself, Hannah Arendt concludes that violence should be excluded from the public realm.

If history were seen (as Marx and Engels do) in terms of a chronological succession, than violence, through war or revolution, would appear to be the only interruption of this process. But Arendt is against this view and argues that at the heart of the change is the human ability to act; action and not violence as absolute condition transforms the social and political reality.⁴

Her opinion in this matter is closely related with the old Greek concept of the *polis*. In a Greek *polis* we find free men as the heart of this political and social organization. But freedom here means action. In other words, the possibility of people’s action is conditioned by the free relations among individuals. Therefore, concepts like coercion, force or violence had no major role in this type of political form. The ideal form of political action here is persuasion.

Even the idea of power in the way which is understood normally nowadays (that kind of power held by one person by which he can rule the others) is turned by Hannah Arendt upside down, when referring to the *polis* as a social and political ideal. The concept of power will not be dwelt upon too much here. The emphasis is placed here on the fact that power is seen

³ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

differently inside the *polis*. Power rests on people and on their possibility to act freely, politically speaking. Obedience, rules and laws have no place in a *polis*. In Arendt's words: "...they had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule or law and command."⁵ Arendt uses the image of the *polis* more as a metaphor. She doesn't refer just to the political institutions of the Greek city-states. The metaphor of the *polis* stands for all the examples in the history where the public realm was set for action and speech by and for a community of free and equal citizens.⁶

2. The political realm

Turning the discussion to the political realm, Hannah Arendt approaches the phenomenon of power and its relation to the concept of violence. This approach creates "problems" from the beginning as long as all the political theorists agree that "violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power"⁷. From this point we are not far from Mao Tse-tung's conviction that "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun".

Before we continue to focus on power it is necessary to clarify what exactly Arendt understands when she refers to the political. First of all, this is distinct from what one can do or create in isolation or in relating with the others intimately, as in love or even in friendship. Put simply, politics means action, action in public affairs and more concrete, "action is speech in public about public affairs"⁸. And what is really distinct about Arendt's view is that politics means first of all what all the people do together rather than what some few can do to others. And here we can turn back to the phenomenon of power. For Hannah Arendt power means the capacity to act in concert for a public-political purpose whereas normally power is seen just as an instrument of rule, strong related with the instinct of domination. The latter is sustained by many past thinkers and Arendt resorts to them in order to clarify more how *power* is or was understood until then. For example, Votaire sustained that power consists in making others act as I choose, Max

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁶ Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, *The political philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 77.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *op.cit.*, p. 106.

⁸ Danna Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 132.

Weber said that power is present whenever someone has the chance to assert my own will against the resistance. Strausz-Hupé asserted that the world signifies the power of man over man and back to Karl Marx, the state is just an instrument of oppression in the hands of the ruling class. At this point Arendt concludes that if we speak about power just in terms of command and obey it becomes hard to assert something else than that “there is no greater power than that which grows out of the barrel of a gun”.⁹ Here we reached a difficult topic and Hannah Arendt pays a lot of attention when discussing about power because if we remain just with Mao Tse-tung’s statement a lot of confusion among concepts like violence, power or force can be made. That is why Arendt tries to distinguish very strictly among some key terms used almost synonymously in the political science. And very important is that terms like power and force express distinct phenomena. It is not just a terminological theoretical delimitation. In this respect, the distinction between power and force is the first one brought into attention by Arendt.

3. The need of distinction

Force deals with coercion while power is related more to the authority that preserves political freedom. This kind of authority doesn’t belong to one person because the political power lies on the consent of a group to act together. Power belongs to a group and even if in a state just one man gains the power, the thing that keeps him up there is a group which empower and continuously sustain him. When the group vanishes the power vanishes; consequently power always relies on numbers. Arendt’s best expression regarding power lies in the following quote: “*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.”¹⁰

Another distinction from force is that power is a human product and something that a group achieved together whereas force is, or it should be, more a natural phenomenon. One may speak about force when forces of nature or forces of circumstances are involved. The latter is to indicate the energy that can be released from a social movement. Anyway, force can be used as a synonym for violence, especially when violence deals with

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

coercion.

The use of the term *power* in saying that somebody is a powerful man has a metaphorical sense. But, when we use the normal sense, what a powerful man is supposed to mean is more related to an individual characteristic, his singular power which is named *strength*. Strength is an individual characteristic of a person and it can be shown in confronting another person and especially a group of people. Arendt sustains that even the strength of the strongest singular person can be overthrown by the many and this fact has not just a psychological explanation (one of these explanations might be the envy of the weak for the strong). In society nothing is more normal than the attempt of the group which has the power to overpower the strength of the independent. The independent can be here a threat for the maintenance of the power by the group. In this respect Arendt is very clear: "It is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against independence, the property of individual strength."¹¹ As a conclusion here, power is the ability of the human being to act in concert while strength, on the other hand, is a characteristic of individuals.

Another problematical concept in Arendt's opinion is the concept of *authority*. Authority can be the feature of a person or of an institution. In this sense, we can speak about the relation between the father and the child, between teacher and pupil. Arendt's examples for the authority of an institution are the Roman Senate or the hierarchical offices of the Church. A priest can still be respected even if his actions sometimes run counter pre-established social rules regarding certain categories of people: he is drunk or he smokes. Anyway, authority doesn't need coercion or persuasion to be supported. Authority is maintained as long as the people who should obey keep their respect for the one in charge. Authority is bestowed.

4. Between power and violence

The most important distinction here is the one between power and violence and that is because, as it was said earlier, these two phenomena can be very easily confused. If it is said that violence is the extreme form of power the idea of confusion becomes even more evident.

First of all it is necessary to underline that violence distinguishes through its instrumental character. This means that violence needs

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

implements in order to take action. As Hannah Arendt put it, implements of violence, as all the tools, are designed to multiply some natural skills. And, referring to the concept of strength, this multiplying can go till the point where the natural strength is just substituted by the implements. As an example, if someone uses a gun he, on one hand, uses violence and so coercion to gain what he wants and on the other hand, he multiplies his natural strength so much that the implement (the gun) becomes more important and so a substitute for his strength. Reaching this point it is important to say that Hannah Arendt emphasizes that the extreme form of power is All against One and that the extreme form of violence is One against All.¹² As we said earlier power always stands in need of numbers and as far as violence is concerned, this extreme form of it is not possible without instruments. A man face to face with another man or with a group, relying only on his natural strength doesn't necessarily represent a threat but if he has a gun in his hands a violent action has way more chances to take place. If it was said that violence is just the extreme form of power and "All against One" is also the extreme form of power we can come to the conclusion that this kind of relationship (All against One) necessarily deals with violence or at least with coercion. On the other hand, if "One against All" is the extreme form of violence, it is obvious that, that One has implements in order to activate his violence. Moreover, he is as well a threat for the ones who have the power. One cannot, just with his strength to be a real threat. Hannah Arendt does not develop too much the discussion about these two expressions and she is also not very precise. What we can at least understand is that in "All against One", "All" means definitely authentic power as far as power is viewed as relying on numbers. It is an extreme form because it is not merely a number but includes everybody. The "One" in "One against all" obtains power only through violence, through implements.

Arendt focuses on the idea that power and violence should be seen as two opposite phenomena and people should distinguish between them. She writes: "Politically speaking, it is insufficient to say that power and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent."¹³ They are not just different, Arendt stresses upon their opposition, as far as the opposite of violence is not non-violence but power and for this reason violence cannot be involved from its

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 123.

opposite. She insists on this especially because these two concepts are still understood randomly when it comes to the political scene. Hannah Arendt admits that it is very tempting to see power in terms of command and obedience and hence to relate it with violence.

Continuing on dwelling on difference, she considers that force and violence should be excluded from the public sphere, but that they are implicit in the private one (which she calls “the household function”). She argues by pointing out that the private sphere is pre-political: before man can construct a political realm he must first master necessity and Arendt claims that force and violence are the only means for it. Still they belong to this pre-political phase and should be used only here. When it comes to power she sees it as a *sui generis* phenomenon. It is, first of all related to action and persuasion. Because these two belong to the public sphere power belongs to the political. Action is connected to the concerted activities of the members of the society and persuasion “consists in the ability to secure the consent of others through rational means, that is, through unconstrained discussion and debate”.¹⁴ Arendt also maintains that power is a legitimate phenomenon whereas violence can be at most justifiable but not at all legitimate. Power derives its legitimacy from the basic idea of people getting together in order to act in concert and to establish a political community. For this, power doesn’t need a justification. Only the phenomena that are looking forward to achieving something, to reach an end which lies in the future, need justifications. This is the case of violence because it is ruled by the means-end category. Through violence people have the purpose to gain something in the future (for example power), and this might be its justification. On the other hand violence cannot be legitimate because legitimacy has a political character and as we saw earlier, violence belongs just to the pre-political sphere. As Arendt put it, political theory “can only deal with the justification of violence because this justification constitutes its political limits; if, instead, it arrives at a glorification or justification of violence as such, it is no longer political but anti-political.”¹⁵ Another difference between power and violence is that, if power keeps the public realm together and also the society united, violence can just create “earth shakes”, namely rebellions and revolutions.

¹⁴ Maurizio Passerin D’Entreves, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Middlesex:Penguin, 1977, p. 19, apud Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1992, p. 126.

5. Focusing on warfare

Even if she dwells on these distinctions, Hannah Arendt admits that there is still a gap between theory and reality. And this gap is best revealed by the way in which the governments and the ones who are in charge understand to use the power. Arendt is very clear here: violence is used to maintain the power. “A power’s special case is the power of government; in this case, specially in foreign relations violence appears as a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers;”¹⁶ This situation has deeper reasons than for instance the common reason of defending your people by all means. As we already know, violence needs implements and that is what the developing of technology was also aware of, because the so called revolution of technology was mostly focused on warfare. The problem, in Hannah Arendt’s point of view, is that this technological development was sustained and financed by the governments. The goal was deterrence not some preparations in order to gain a victory. And this arms race was not even for preparing a war but just for the reason that a good deterrence is a good guarantee for peace. All these things started after The Second World War which was followed, as Arendt sustains, not by peace “but by a cold war and the establishment of the military – industrial –labour complex.”¹⁷ War was no more the continuation of politics by other means, as Clausewitz wrote in the nineteenth-century. After The Second World War peace was the continuation of war by other means which meant that war (at least in a latent state) was a reality supported obviously by the development of the warfare technology. That is why a complete reversal between power and violence could become possible. For instance, a small country can afford to have and to use a biological weapon against a more powerful and rich enemy. Arendt writes: “Hence, the amount of violence at the disposal of any given country may soon not be a reliable indication of the country’s strength or a reliable guarantee against destruction by a substantially smaller and weaker power.”¹⁸ In this respect, it is not far fetched to conclude that an abundance of wealth can be self destructive for power and that wealth can be a false friend in measuring a country’s power. Wealth can turn into a dangerous boomerang.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

For Arendt the most obvious and perhaps the most potent factor for this unexpected development all over the world is the simple fact that technological progress is leading in so many instances straight into disaster; science branches which have developed in this direction have reached a stage where “there’s no damn thing you can do that can’t turned into war”¹⁹.

Hannah Arendt claims that no political goal can justify the technical development of the implements of violence and she gives the most logical reason of all. Supposing that it will be a war between two countries which own nuclear or biological weapons, so to say which are well developed in warfare, it is a madness to speak about who will win and who will lose. Even if one will win it will be obviously the end of both. As Andrei Sakharov put it: “ A thermonuclear war cannot be considered a continuation of politics by other means (according to the formula of Clausewitz). It would be a means of universal suicide.”²⁰

So why does humanity still deal with warfare, as a final solution? Arendt considers that the chief reason why warfare is still with us is neither a secret death wish of the human species, nor an irrepressible instinct of aggression, nor the economic and social dangers inherent in disarmament; the reason is more simple: unfortunately no substitute for this final arbiter in international affairs has yet appeared on the political scene.

6. Violence-the “final” solution

As it was said earlier, even if power and violence are two concepts which should not be confused, the gap between theory and reality can be huge. In this respect, Hannah Arendt pays attention to the phenomenon of revolution which, in her opinion can illustrate very well this gap. She starts from a fact form the political scene. When it comes to foreign relations or domestic affairs, violence appears to be the final solution for the power structure to be kept intact.

Thus violence can function as the last resort of power directed against rebels or revolutionaries, against single individuals who reject being overpowered by the consensus of the majority. It is important to mention that this sort of violence is just for the maintenance of power, especially when those who act violently refuse to accept the consensus of power. In

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

²⁰ Andrei D. Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*, New York, 1968, p. 36, apud Hannah Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

this respect, it can be said from the beginning that revolutions are violent phenomena. Even if the revolutionaries are motivated by moral considerations (for example freedom as a reaction against oppression or poverty) they preach and use violence, in order to maintain a revolution. On the other side, the government of a state, meaning the institution which has the power, also uses violence in order to maintain the power. In a battle in which the reaction to violence is also violence, the one who has superiority is the one who is in charge of power. Here, it is obvious that a government owns better implements of violence. For instance, the army and the police forces are normally the elements which maintain, sometimes in a violent way, the power in its “rightful” place. As Arendt puts it: “In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long the power structures of the government is intact- that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or police forces are prepared to use their weapons.”²¹ What is interesting here is that during a revolution the force balance can turn upside down. When the army or the police don’t obey the government anymore, a revolution can be successful.

In Arendt’s view the weak point in revolutionaries’ attitude was that fact that they used violence in order to obtain power. They assumed that violence would produce power and so they didn’t really distinguish between these two phenomena. But violence can only and always destroy power and this result can have two causes. The first one is given by the use of violence in trying to maintain power. Consequently, power, as a concept based on legitimacy and on the consent of a community without need of coercion, is already lost. The second one is that, in case of revolution violence is the thing that strikes power and which, in the end, puts it down. The problem in this point is that power, be it gained or lost, cannot be supported or revived through violence. In Arendt’s opinion revolutions failed whenever revolutionaries acted like tyrants. Tyranny comes into picture when power breaks down and when only violence remains. A revolution fails when it cannot be sustained by power, because only power is political (meaning that power is the essence of the governing) not the violence. It is important to stress that acting in consent implies some respect for human freedom and from this statement we can easily conclude that we cannot speak about power excluding the ideal of human freedom...and violence does not enter the realm of freedom, it destroys it and that is because it attempts to destroy

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

some of the persons themselves.²² Power is more likely to result in a world that respects plurality in every sense of the term and when violence appears power is clearly in jeopardy, at least because violence, once begun it is very hard to be controlled.

Instead of a theoretical conclusion I would like to say a few words about the Romanian revolution, which took place in 1989 and try to analyze a few aspects according to Hannah Arendt's theory. The revolution started violently but led by moral convictions. Poverty, oppression, the lack of freedom of expression and even starving were ruling the country. The revolutionaries, here the normal people, wanted to change the ones who were in charge, the ones who had the power. Actually, we can hardly discuss here about power. It was more tyranny because in charge was just one man who was mostly using means of violence in order to maintain the power and the regime and that was also happened during the revolution. The army and the police forces used their weapons in order to calm down the revolutionaries but they had not too much success (even if many people were killed). The revolution went on and surprisingly or not the force balance changed. The army didn't support the "government" anymore, the tyrant feared the sudden change because he wasn't able to use violence (as the last resort) in order to maintain his power and so the communist regime started to collapse. In fact, according to Arendt, we cannot speak about power, legitimate power in Romania in the regime before 1989. It was more tyranny or it became tyranny when power started to break down. This means what she calls false politics: the use of violence, disrespect for human rights, freedom and positive values of the community – the best example here is communism which "attacked" tradition and transform it in order to serve its own ideology.

Whether or not the revolutionaries gained the power, it is hard to say, but at least since 1990 violence has been seldom used in order to maintain the power. We can ask ourselves why was it still used? Arendt would probably answer to this question in a simple way: unfortunately no substitute for this final arbiter (violence) in international or national affairs has yet appeared on the political scene.

²² Gabriel Masoane Tlaba, *Politics and freedom*, Human Will and Action in the Thought of Hannah Arendt, University Press of America, Boston, 1987, p. 86.

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