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## **FROM VIOLENCE TO TERROR: BEYOND INSTRUMENTAL VIOLENCE IN HANNAH ARENDT'S POLITICAL THOUGHT**

OD PRZEMOCY DO TERRORU: WYJŚCIE POZA IDEĘ  
PRZEMOCY JAKO NARZĘDZIA W MYŚLI POLITYCZNEJ

HANNY ARENDT

### **Abstract**

Hannah Arendt, victim and witness of totalitarian violence, confronted the glorification of violence **with** her philosophical and political theory. However, she was not a pacifist, because she was aware that “under certain circumstances violence is the only way to set the scales of justice right again” [Arendt, 1970, p. 64]. This ambivalence reveals the boundless character of violence in any attempt to conceptualize it. When she defines violence, she does it in instrumental terms in two complementary ways: violence requires instruments, and it is instrumental in itself. Means-end rationality crosses the phenomenon of violence, and this is why the question about decency of means appears to be essential. However, Arendt knew that the own dynamic

### **Abstrakt**

Hannah Arendt, ofiara i świadek totalitarnej przemocy, skonfrontowała gloryfikację przemocy z własnymi teoriami filozoficznymi i politycznymi. Nie była wszakże pacyfistką, mając świadomość, że “w pewnych okolicznościach przemoc jest jedyną metodą, która pozwala ponownie ustawić *szalę sprawiedliwości* we właściwym położeniu” [Arendt, 1970, p. 64]. Owa ambiwalencja ujawnia bezgraniczną naturę przemocy podczas wszelkich prób jej konceptualizacji. Arendt definiuje przemoc w kategoriach instrumentalnych na dwa dopełniające się sposoby: przemoc wymaga stosownych instrumentów i jest zarazem narzędziem sama w sobie. Skupiona jedynie na celu racjonalność wykracza poza zjawisko przemocy, prowokując

of violence tends to go beyond its own limits in which it would remain enclosed. This paper aims to recover those tools provided by her work to analyze the overwhelming and generative character of violence which, abandoned to its own logic, loses the distinction between means and aims. This is a type of violence that it is not a means, but an end in itself, and, in Arendtian terms, is no more instrumental violence because it turns into “total terror”: an indiscriminate violence which becomes its own purpose.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, violence, means, end, instruments, instrumental rationality, terror, overwhelming, dispensability.

zasadne pytanie o moralność stosowanych dla osiągnięcia celu środków. Arendt wiedziała jednakże, że naturalna dynamika przemocy oznacza przekraczanie przypisanych jej ograniczeń. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ponownego wykorzystania narzędzi zdefiniowanych w dziełach Arendt do analizy totalnego, a zarazem twórczego charakteru przemocy, która, poddana wyłącznie działaniu mechanizmów własnej logiki, traci zdolność rozróżnienia środków i celów. Ten typ przemocy nie jest środkiem, lecz celem samym w sobie i, wedle rozumienia Arendt, przestaje być instrumentalną przemocą, zmieniając się w “totalny terror” – bezrefleksyjną przemoc, której celem staje się ona sama.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Hannah Arendt, przemoc, środki, cele, instrumenty, instrumentalna racjonalność, terror, totalny, zbędnosc.

## 1. Introduction

Totalitarian violence and the threat of total annihilation during the nuclear age were considered by Hannah Arendt the most important “political” experiences in twentieth century. The collapse inherent in both led Arendt to rethink some political concepts which, according to her, had lost their capacity to categorize our understandings of the world. Among these, the review of the concept of violence became a constant in her work.

As a spectator and victim of totalitarian violence, Arendt confronted the glorification of violence with her philosophical and political theory. However, she was not a pacifist because she was aware that “under certain circumstances violence –acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences– is the only way to set the scales of justice right again” [Arendt, 1970, p. 64]. This ambivalence reveals the boundless character of violence in any attempt to conceptualize it, but at the same time it reveals the need to think about it, in order to analyze its transformations and to prevent its possible ramifications.

When Hannah Arendt defined what violence is, she did it in instrumental terms. Means-end rationality crosses the phenomenon of violence, and that is why the question about decency of means appears to be essential. Nevertheless, the problem is not only about the implements of violence. Arendt knew that the dynamic of violence tends to transcend its limits in which, at least initially, it would remain enclosed. What makes violence hard to grasp is that its own dynamic goes beyond the limit of its condition of being a means to an end. Taking into consideration the Arendtian distinction between what violence is and what is not, this paper aims to recover those tools that her own work gives us to analyze the overwhelming character of violence which, abandoned to its own logic, tends to lose the distinction between means and aims and, as we will see, can lead from violence to terror.

## 2. Political Philosophy of Distinctions. Prepolitical Violence

First of all, I would like to emphasize the obvious remark that any work must be analyzed from the biographical experience of the author. This is particularly important in order to understand Arendt's work as a "political philosophy of distinctions." The phenomenon of violence is in the heart of Arendtian thought, and her encounter with totalitarianism is, without doubt, the starting point from which she built, her political proposal as a counterweight. This is characterized by distinguishing different spheres of human life –such as political/prepolitical; public/private–, which had been erased by that system of government. According to her, the lack of distinctions between spheres of human life goes back to the origins of the Western tradition of political thought and it distorted the authentic meaning of political sphere. However only totalitarian regimes represent its total collapse. In her view, totalitarianism is a kind of anti-political system that transcended the destruction of the intersubjective public realm and penetrates into the subjectivity of each individual: "it is never content to rule by external means, namely through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within" [Arendt, 1976, p. 325].

Taking into account this, and in order to delimit the place and the meaning of violence in her work, some distinctions should be clarified. Firstly, it is important to consider her distinction between prepolitical and political spheres. Unlike Western tradition, which had conceived politics in terms of dominance and as a means to be free out of this sphere, Arendt argues that "politics" is an end in itself and the unique space in which humans can be authentically free. It is a realm of plurality and artificial equality where individuals can show themselves and distinguish one from another, through their speech and actions. According to the thinker, "action" is synonym of freedom<sup>1</sup> and it is contrary to cyclical and repetitive behavior. It is the human capacity to begin something new, which requires the company of other "actors" and "spectators" *with* whom we act together, and *through* whom we are recognized as subjects. In this public area, the archetypical model of human being is the *zoon politikon*.

In respect of the prepolitical area, it refers to a double exterior out of political sphere: on the one hand, the domestic-private realm of life which is tied to activities dedicated to satisfying basic needs<sup>2</sup>; on the other hand, the international realm in wartime. In Arendt's view, both of them are nonpolitical areas which are dominated by hierarchical connections and where asymmetrical relationships of violence can take place. Leaving the international area aside, the first distinction is based on the Arendtian effort to differentiate between the public and the private realms by giving priority to the intersubjective public space as a sphere of mutual recognition in which words can be listened and actions can

<sup>1</sup> In Arendtian terms, "freedom" is not *liberum arbitrium* (a choice between different options). However, it is the human capacity to begin, that it is to say, to interrupt processes and to start others new. This capacity requires always the presence of other humans.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between public and private spheres of life is the main critique of feminist thinkers to Arendt. However, I cannot go into this important topic in this paper.

be shared, and where humans can appear to others in terms of their uniqueness: a “person with a unique story and singular opinions” [Bickford 1995 p. 318]. This sense of “action” as political and existential activity *par excellence*, must be thought in the light of its separation from two other basic activities in human life, which are linked hierarchically and depending on their nearness to freedom, namely, “labor” and “work”.

Contrary to “action”, “labor” is considered the least human activity which is focused on body and satisfaction of fundamental human needs. It is essentially linked to the prepolitical and private sphere and its archetypical model of human being is not *zoon politikon* but *animal laborans*. As far as “work” is concerned, is regarded the productive activity which allows us to build an artificial world of objects and, in spite of having a higher range than labor, continues belonging to prepolitical sphere. In this case, its archetypical model of human being is *homo faber*, that is, the human being as a maker, and, as we will see, it is linked to the instrumental dimension of violence in Arendt’s theory.

In short, she claims that the political sphere is one without violence and it is linked to the highest degree of freedom<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, it is not an innate sphere of human life and it emerges when women and men act together. That is why she insists on preserving it as a pure and artificial realm of pacific relationships, and also that is why she confronts the political tradition which has politicized the phenomenon of violence, as well as the tradition which has naturalized it. This tension is shown in her famous essay entitled *On Violence* [1970]. In this work, Arendt argues against both political traditions which, according to her, have supported two wrongs identifications.

The first one considers violence in terms of power by distorting both concepts and the realities which they refer to. The Arendtian distinction between power and violence is well known. It confronts the Western political thought, which understands power as a relationship of dominance, and violence as its highest expression<sup>4</sup>. However, she suggests a recovery of the republican notion of relational power in terms of “acting in concert”<sup>5</sup>, which requires the presence of others. According to this theory, there is no violence where there is power, and when power fades (that is to say, when we disperse and resign to our capacity of act together), cracks appear and, through them, violence can (re)arise.

From Arendt’s point of view, violence is not power, but nor is it an innate and irrational human instinct, as if it was a necessary manifestation of biological life.<sup>6</sup> Thus the other tradition which Arendt argues against is the tradition of organic thought which conceives human violence in terms of animal aggression. She confronts the philosophical

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the meaning of politics in Arendt’s theory cannot be reduced to professional politicians.

<sup>4</sup> I am referring to what Arendt called the *Main Tradition* of Western political thought. According to her, this tradition started with Plato and the meaning of politics as a relationship of dominance. However, she is specifically referring to the tradition of political thought started in the sixteenth century by Jean Bodin and his understanding of political power (of Modern States) from the idea of sovereignty.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to clarify that Arendt’s understanding of “agreement” does not erase the idea of “conflict” nor tends to unanimity. On the contrary, it “implies the notion of agreement only when it is not unanimity, namely when agreement is thought, according to Lyotard, in connection to disagreement” (Forti, p. 374).

<sup>6</sup> She refers to the philosophical tradition initiated by vitalism in nineteenth century (Nietzsche and the “*slan vital*” of Bergson) but she is specifically referring to the “New left” which conceived violence as the best way to express freedom.

and political doctrines that perceive human life as an inevitable struggle, life itself as a “creative principle”, and violence as a necessary part of this struggle and highest expression of life:

*Nothing, in my opinion, could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters by which power and violence are interpreted in biological terms. As these terms are understood today, life and life's alleged creativity are their common denominator, so that violence is justified on the ground of creativity. The organic metaphor with our entire present discussion of these matters, especially of the riots, is permeated—the notion of a ‘sick society’, of which riots are symptoms, as fever is a symptom of disease—can only promote violence in the end [Arendt, 1970, p. 75].*

### 3. The Instrumental Dimension of Violence

Having arrived at this point, we should ask ourselves what violence is in Arendt's view. The first specific definition of violence can be found in her critical study of modern age, *The Human Condition* [1998], in which she analyzes “mute” violence inherent in productive activity. This is the violence done to nature by *homo faber*, in order to build the artificial world and to give stability to human life. This reification inherent in fabrication process is connected to the dominating character of maker man, who controls the creation as well as the destruction of the world that he produces, and who sees himself as “the lord and master” of the same. This is for the reason that *homo faber* is dominated by the logic of means and ends, which allows him to control the beginning, the development and the end of his activity. This link between men as makers and violence is based on the teleological and instrumental character that they both share. As Bat-Ami Bar On states, when Arendt defines violence, she does it in instrumental terms, namely in two different but connected senses: violence requires instruments, “the implements of the violence”, but also it is instrumental in itself because it is a means to an external purpose [Arendt, 1998, p. 157–58]. Therefore, violence, “like all means, always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues” [Arendt, 1970, p. 51].

Saying that “the end justifies the means” can be acceptable, in a sense, in the context of inherent violence in fabrication, that is, within the artificial world where *homo faber* can control and reverse the process of production. However, the same cannot be said when it is applied to human affairs, in other words, when violence with its means and violence as a means becomes present not in the relationship between human beings and objects, but between individuals.

Hence, although there is not an intrinsic negative sense in Arendt's conception of violence (fundamentally because it allows us to build an artificial and human sphere where we can meet and act together), it turns into negative when the mentality of *homo faber* goes beyond the borders of his own frame and it spreads across the sphere of human action. This objectifies men and women and turns fabrication and its instrumental and utilitarian logic into the unique model to understand history, politics and interpersonal relationships: “The element of destruction inherent in all purely technical activity

becomes preeminent, however, as soon as its imagery and its line of thinking is applied to political activity, action, or historical events, or any other interaction between man and man” [Arendt, 1994, p. 283]. Following Arendt, not only it distorts reality and human action by refusing its contingency, but also “legitimizes” violence in political sphere as if it were inevitable [Bernstein, 2013, p. 93]. And this one is exactly the problem presented in her essay *1970*, in which she aims to analyze “the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs” [Arendt, 1970, p. 8], mainly in the light of the extreme dimension it had reached in twentieth century.

As far as the implements of violence are concerned, they reached such levels of technical development and potential destruction that they exceeded their own ends. Arendt was aware of this and analyzed it taking into account the systematical violence of extermination camps, as well as weapons of mass destruction and the threat of total annihilation which had gone beyond the war as an end:

*In both cases, the extermination exceeded the stage of war; it is not about to suppress an enemy, but to eradicate, through a technical process, a mass of individuals without any possibility of resistance. Since ancient times, the whole history is marked by massacres, which appears to have a ‘human’ aspect compared to the cold and technical exterminations in Auschwitz and Hiroshima*<sup>7</sup> [Traverso, 2001, p. 123].

Regarding this issue, to rethink not the decency of aims but decency of means becomes, without doubt, one of the most important Arendtian concerns, particularly in a context where “not only has the progress of science ceased to coincide with the progress of mankind (whatever that may mean), but it could even spell mankind’s end” [Arendt, 1970, p. 30].

However, we should not lose sight of what really fails, which is according to Arendt the introduction of instrumental rationality in human relationships, with the consequential loss of recognition of others as possible interlocutors, in other words, the loss of human intersubjectivity and the emergence of subject-object relationships between them. In this case, certain people (or groups of them) are reduced to a mere social functionality; to a mere means in order to those who still are subjects can achieve their ends. Only from this point, we will be able to understand that extreme types of violence materialized during twentieth century are not a kind of brutal or irrational force, but, as Traverso says, they are the result of “*homo faber’s delirium*”. In order to think about “the decency of means” and to analyze the invisibilization process of its indecency, we must firstly rethink those dynamics that are introduced in processes of recognition or indifference of the individuals over whom are applied the tools of violence. As the historian Enzo Traverso mentions, “*from such a criterion of rationality (the pure instrumental rationality in humans relationships), violence can be used without finding any ethical obstacle*”<sup>8</sup> [Traverso, 2001, p. 58].

<sup>7</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>8</sup> Translation mine.

Arendt was aware that not only the tools of violence had gone beyond the ends. There is something inherent to instrumental nature of violence that appears to transcend its own condition of being a means to an end. This is related to the intrinsic perplexity in utilitarian rationality based on the instrumentalization of *homo faber* which is always accompanied by “the devaluation of all values”, since every end (once is reached) is transformed in a means to another new end. Although, from the perspective of *homo faber* the productive process finishes with the finished object, and even though it seems to be logical to expect a delimited end of violence, this is not the case when we refer to violence between individuals. It is precisely because it is connected to what Arendt denominated “action”.

In contrast to the widely known Machiavellian theory based on the belief that a good end justifies any means, Arendt argues that in the public sphere of human action, which is plural and therefore unpredictable, there cannot be guaranteed if the use of violence will lead to the desired aim. Besides, this is connected to the cyclical character of violence, especially in this sphere of human affairs in which actions provoke reactions and so on. According to Simon Crithley, “violence is not so much a question of a single act that breaks a supposed continuum of nonviolence or peace. Rather, violence is best understood as a historical cycle of violence and counterviolence. In other words, violence is not one but two” (“The Theater of Violence”). In short, when human action and violence interact, we run the risk of getting caught up in the “spiral of violence”.

#### 4. The Overwhelming Character of Violence. From Violence to Terror

However, as I have mentioned, Arendt was not a pacifist because she knew in some “limit situations”, violence can be the only way to respond. But she insisted on restrict its use to a reaction and only in the cases when a short-term goal could be the result. It is re-action which must stay out of the political sphere, without becoming a long-term action and a destroyer of the public realm.

Even so, in accordance with Arendt, violent reactions (even the most justifiable) could not remove two inherent risks of violence: on one hand, its arbitrariness and its unpredictable results, when it is related to action; on the other hand, its generative character, which is why violent means and violence as means tend to overwhelm its goals and to introduce others new [Finlay, 2009, p. 29]. In Arendt’s words:

*The danger of violence, even if it moves consciously within a non-extremist framework of short-term goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic. Action is irreversible, and a return to the status quo in case of defeat is always unlikely. The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world [Arendt, 1970, p. 80].*

This is the overwhelming and generative character of violence which seems to be especially dangerous when it appears in human relationships, owing to its encounter with unexpectability of action.

In any case, Arendt does not reject violence *a priori*, because she is aware of the existence of a type of violence related to certain “sense of justice” (that is, the violence of the oppressed), as well as she knew that the most unjust violence (the violence of the oppressor), even unjust, could be justified by appealing to its purpose. Nevertheless, as we have seen, violence can only be justified if it maintains its instrumental character. However, when violence is abandoned to its own dynamic, it runs the risk of overwhelming its own means-end rationality. When this happens there is no more delimited goal to appeal and everything is turned into an incessant movement. This introduces a type of violence that it is not a means, but an end in itself; a type of violence that, in fact, is no more instrumental violence because it transforms into what Arendt called “terror”, and more specifically “total terror.” That is, an indiscriminate violence which “has lost its purpose or, rather, has becomes its own true purpose” [Cavareo, 2008, p. 122].

Violence and terror refer to different realities in Arendt’s work. Whereas violence “adapts its means accordingly” (that is, it has an end, even if it is cruel) [McGowan, 1997, p. 265], terror, when it is “total”, is incessant and unpredictable. And whereas violence is a phenomenon shared by tyrannical, despotic, totalitarian, and even democratic systems, the innovation introduced by terror in totalitarian governments is the perversion of the instrumental character of violence, without losing their inherent connection: “terror (...) is 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, 1970, p. 55].

Therefore, as I have mentioned before, according to Arendt, violence is not power, neither is it aggression and, as we can see now, nor is it terror. However, it is precisely because terror is the essence of a type of government which implements violence without aims, that is important not to lose of sight the borders which separate them, mainly because, regarding the transcendent character of violence, they can be very close in some situations. That is the reason why it is crucial to detect dynamics which can turn into dangerous bridges that could lead from violence to terror. This requires to keep in mind that the difference between them is not quantitative (it is not about more or less violence), but qualitative, and it is narrowly linked to the degenerated logics introduced in interhuman relationships. To the extent that violence done to nature by *homo faber* can be conceived as “the way humans attempt to become like God, imitating in violent fabrication the absolute creator” [McGowan, 1997, p 276], this can lead them to the false dream of “absolute sovereignty”, however, in this case, not over nature, but over other human beings. The concept of “sovereignty” is absolutely incompatible with Arendt’s

<sup>9</sup> As Dana Villa states: “Terror is also (generally speaking) a means, one typically employed by a tyrant or despot to keep individuals fearful and submissive. Throughout political history terror has been employed as a means ‘to retain power, to intimidate people, to make them afraid, and...to cause them to behave in certain ways and not in others.’ But when Arendt confronted totalitarian terror she emphasized a crucial difference. In the case of the Nazis and Stalinist Communism, terror was not just a means (although it started out that way). It was, rather the very essence of these regimes, their *raison d’être*. It is literally without end, the sacrifice of one class of innocents always being succeeded by the extermination of a new set of victims. The perpetual violence of the regimes flows from the relentless dynamism of the movements themselves” (104).



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understanding of freedom and action, in terms of the capacity to begin something new, which is always linked to the others.

Long before her study about the human condition, Arendt had warned about the inherent danger in the “dream of omnipotence” which, within the human affairs, leads from the belief of “everything is permitted” to “everything is possible.” The idea of “everything is permitted”, the feeling of omnipotence, and the instrumentalization of individuals have introduced terrible forms of violence in human history. However, the expression “everything is possible” implied a far more radical proposition according to which freedom not only is restricted, but it is also completely eradicated. Following Arendt, this can only be possible by transforming human nature itself, and this was exactly the terrible novelty introduced by totalitarianism: to believe in “total domination” by making “humans superfluous.” In short, reification processes and the reduction of the other to a means, starts devaluation processes that leads from the reduction of individuals to mere usefulness, to their absolute dispensability.

## 5. Conclusion

If we hold onto Arendt’s reflections on violence, it appears to be limited to an instrumental perspective: on the one hand, the conception of violence from the unique point of view of the use of tools would restrict her understanding of violence to a physical dimension by losing sight of other types of violence, such a structural or symbolic; on the other hand, if violence is instrumental by nature, it seems to be subordinated to the condition of being a means to and external end. However, this paper tried to demonstrate that, in spite of Arendt’s definition of violence, she gives us more tools to think its transcendent character than its instrumental limited sense.

On the basis of the points mentioned above, it would seem that there is an ambiguity not solved in Arendt’s reflections on violence: she tries to conceptualize it in instrumental terms, but at the same time she does not stop referring to its boundless character, beyond means-ends terms. And this is because recent political history (of Arendt and ours) has demonstrated that violence cannot be reduced to the use of tools, neither can it be limited to an instrumental rationality. Related to its instruments, her analysis allows us to discover invisible bridges which lead from violence to terror, as well types of nonphysical violence which can “kill man, not indeed necessarily as a living organism, but *qua* man” [Arendt, 1998, p. 188]. Regarding its instrumental rationality, there is a type of violence away from any intention, but it is not a kind of blind hatred. In other words, it is not instrumental, but neither is it irrational, in terms of an innate force or a form of sadistic perversion. It is a “banal violence” which can be extremely terrible and it is linked to the “inability to think”, an absence of the capacity to judge the acts of others as well as our own, and therefore the inability to assume any kind of responsibility [Campillo, 2008, p. 202].

Hannah Arendt was aware that violence appears when power (“acting in concert”) is weakened, but she also was aware that not only physical violence can destroy bridges of communication and recognition, but also process of isolation and indifference. In 1951 Arendt finished her first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with a stark

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, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man” [Arendt, 1976, p. 459]. In the light of currently global events (such as the increase in poverty, the problem of borders, and the crisis of the refugees), emerges the ethical responsibility to rethink, one more time, if we will be able to relieve our own political, social and economic miseries.

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