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## **Hannah Arendt's reflections on power, violence and terror**

**Abstract:** In this paper, I address the question of Arendt's distinction between power and violence. While violence according to Arendt is ruled by means-end reasoning, power corresponds to the human ability to act in concert. Thus power is the essence of all government, deriving its legitimacy from the people acting as a political community, while violence can never lead to the legitimate exercise of authority. Power and violence usually appear together, and violence may sometimes be justified; however, violence should never be equated with power in Arendt's sense. Arendt also considers the relation between violence and terror. While terror involves violence, it is not identical with violence. She illustrates the difference by revealing the characteristic of terror in totalitarian regimes: the capacity to systematically destroy legitimate power and human plurality by destroying the space of action, the common world that is created between people.

**Keywords:** Arendt; power; action; violence; politics; terror.

### **1. Historical context / contemporary events**

Hannah Arendt's essay *On Violence* originated from her participation in a heated panel debate that took place 3 years earlier at the famous Theatre for Ideas, a meeting place for New York intellectuals. The discussion was chaired by Robert Silvers of the New York Review of Books. Other participants in the panel were Noam Chomsky, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Robert Lowell (Klein, 1971, vi; Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 413; Bernstein, 2011, p. 3).

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) insisted that thinking springs from experience. *On Violence* is packed with references to contemporary events, the “resistance movement against the war in Vietnam“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 18), the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, the student movement, which she described as marked by an ”appetite for action“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 19), indeed, by an “not yet exhausted supply of confidence in the possibility of changing the world through action“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 19). This generation has grown up “under the shadow of the atom bomb” (Arendt, 1970, p. 17), i.e. the new threat of the earth’s destruction (Birmingham, 2010, pp. 1-20). The worldwide rebellion of students against an experience, that it is precisely “progress that is leading in so many instances straight into disaster” (Arendt, 1970, p. 20), prompted Hannah Arendt to reflect on the role of violence.

This generation realized that the “apparently irresistible technological progress [...] today threatens the existence of entire ethnic groups and potentially of humanity, indeed of organic life in general“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 20). To Stephen Spenders, it was a generation for whom the future is “like a time-bomb buried, but ticking away, in the present”; that is those who can hear the quiet ticking of the bomb despite the noise of the present (Arendt, 1970, p. 21).

The key experiences for Hannah Arendt and her contemporaries were “experiences of wars and revolutions”, i.e. they did not experience politics as the collective decision-making preceded by parliamentary debates, but rather as violence, as terror and totalitarian rule; this generation equated political action with violent action (Arendt, 1993, p. 124f.).

After the Second World War, Arendt began striving to formulate a “political action that is not marked by violence” (Arendt, 1993, p. 126). This is not an easy task because the connection between politics and violence has to do not only with the experiences of war and totalitarian rule, but also with a thought tradition that equates power and violence. In her essay *On Violence*, she quotes C. Wright Mills who says, “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 36), thus following Max Weber’s definition of the state as “the rule of men over men based on the means of legitimate, that is allegedly legitimate, violence“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 36). If this is the way we think about power, Arendt argues, then it makes sense to conceive of violence as the ultimate form of power.

This thought tradition begins with Plato and ends, for the time being, with Marx. It is a tradition in which action is either misunderstood as ruling (Plato, Hobbes) or constructed as acts of governance (Kant) (Arendt, 1998,

32) or confused with production (Marx) (Arendt, 2002, 290). Hannah Arendt does not continue along these lines, but makes a new start by linking politics with acting rather than making. This link leads us directly to the centre of her political thinking.

## 2. The sharp distinction between power and violence

What is the difference between fabrication and action? And what role does the distinction between fabrication and action play for key political concepts such as power and violence?

Power and violence rarely occur in their pure form, and yet the distinctions Hannah Arendt makes are not arbitrary. We must be aware that she does not attempt to give an isolated definition of power; what she does is to situate the phenomenon of power in the area of tension between other concepts she developed in *The Human Condition* (1958) - and partly earlier, for example in her study of totalitarianism: action, speech, plurality, natality, the public realm, opinion, conviction and public freedom (Bernstein, 2011, p. 7). These concepts collectively form the texture of her view of political life, and they are the backdrop for her approach to power and violence.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that power is always “a power potential [...] and not an unchangeable, measurable and reliable entity like force or strength.” Power is not actually possessed by anyone, “[it] springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (Arendt, 1967, p. 252). Hence we read in the essay *On Violence*:

*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. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo* - without a people or group there is no power), disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes. (Arendt, 1970, p. 45)*

The close relationship between power and action - “action and power are mutually defined” (Ricoeur, 2010, p. 24) - brings into view the non-hierarchical and non-instrumental character of Arendt's concept of power. As is well known, plurality is the condition for action, and human plurality is characterized by both diversity and equality. Power can therefore only be conceived as an egalitarian and non-hierarchical relationship between people.

Power is, on the one hand, spontaneous and unpredictable - "it arises between people when they act together" (Arendt, 1967, p. 252) (the English language makes this spontaneous character clear in one word: "power springs up" (Arendt, 1958, p. 200) - and, on the other hand, it is not based on subordination and obedience, but on consent (to the initiative) and support (of the one who has taken the initiative or the beginning itself) (Peeters, 2008, p. 174).

This non-hierarchical concept of power is reflected in Arendt's understanding of law. Laws of a political community are "directives" that are accepted rather than "imperatives" that are imposed (Arendt, 1970, p. 96; Ricoeur, 2010, p. 22). We can understand the non-instrumental character of power even better if we add action. First of all, action does not derive its meaning from a goal that is external to action, because action cannot be equated with fabrication.

When it comes to action, it is "no work product but exists as sheer actuality" (Arendt, 1967, p. 262). This understanding of action can be applied to power: power is an end in itself. Obviously, Arendt does not mean to deny that "governments pursue policies and employ their power to achieve prescribed goals" (Arendt, 1970, p. 52) but emphasize that „the power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 53).

It is quite different with violence. It is characterized by its instrumental nature. Violence "like all means, always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues" (Arendt, 1970, p. 52). Then violence can only justify itself through its end. The further in the future the end lies, the more difficult it is to find a plausible justification. The reason why violence can only be rational to the extent that it pursues short-term goals is that when people act, they can never know what the consequences of their actions will be. Simply because they are always acting into an already existing web of relationships in which others are not only reacting but also acting.

The justification of violence through a future end represents an important difference between violence and power, because power is not a means to an end to be achieved beyond it, but an end in itself. Power does not need the kind of justification that violence needs; what it does need is legitimacy: "Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow" (Arendt, 1970, p. 53). "Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate" (Arendt, 1970, p. 53; Peeters, 2008, p. 182).

In elaborating the difference between violence and power, Arendt captures something essential about power, something we are on the way to forget, namely that power can spring up spontaneously when people act together; it can grow and become revolutionary (Bernstein, 2011, p. 12). One example that illustrates the spontaneous emergence of power is the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, in which Arendt saw a heroic revival of the lost tradition of what she called “revolutionary spirit”.

Just as she demonstrates that power must be distinguished from violence, so too must “revolutionary spirit” be distinguished from “revolutionary violence” (Bernstein 2011, p. 14). The “revolutionary spirit” is the publicly perceivable freedom whose goal is to establish a new order (*novus ordo saeculorum*). Arendt argues that the men of the American Revolution understood how to distinguish between violence and power. They understood that power is “the very opposite of a pre-political natural violence“ (Arendt, 1965, p. 235). By a new order they meant institutions and organizations based on “promises, covenants, and mutual pledges“ (Arendt, 1965, p. 235). The reason why they succeeded in what other nations failed was a mutual confidence that “arose not from a common ideology but from mutual promises and as such became the basis for ‘associations’ the gathering-together of people for a specified political purpose“ (Arendt, 1965, p. 236).

The 2015 Nobel Peace Prize went to Tunisia. Tunisia is the country among the countries of the so-called Arab Spring that succeeded in establishing a new order. It involved the trade union federation (UGTT), the employers’ association (UTICA), the human rights league (LTDH) and the bar association. It was this quartet that received the Nobel Peace Prize for its national dialogue, which resulted in the formation of a new transitional government and a new constitution.

The “national dialogue” is emblematic of another difference between power and violence. Violence is mute; and this does not simply mean “that speech is helpless when confronted with violence”, but it means that “violence itself is incapable of speech” (Arendt, 1965, p. 20). This is why Arendt can say that “where violence rules absolutely [...], not only the laws [...] but everything and everybody must fall silent”. This silence makes violence a marginal phenomenon of the political realm, “for man, to the extent that as he is a political being, is endowed with the power of speech” (Arendt, 1965, p. 19). Arendt refers to Aristotle, who defined man as “a political being and a being endowed with speech” (Arendt, 1965, p. 19): both complement each other. Violence, however, destroys the connection between word and deed.



### 3. The opposition between violence and power

Without deeds accompanied by words, action would turn into a purely technical activity no power could spring from it:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (Arendt, 1967, p. 252)

We might say that wherever deeds are no longer accompanied by words, the way to violence is paved. „[...] nothing [...] is more common than the combination of violence and power“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 48), but they are not only very different phenomena, in fact they are opposites. Power is not a kind of mitigated violence. When it comes to state power, i.e. a special case of power, the temptation is particularly great to “think of power in terms of command and obedience“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 48). This is because “in foreign relations as well as domestic affairs violence appears as a last resort to keep the power structure intact against individual challengers – the foreign enemy, the native criminal – it looks indeed as though violence were the prerequisite of power and power nothing but a facade, the velvet glove which either conceals the iron hand or will turn out to belong to a paper tiger“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 48).

State power, however, relies on the “support of the laws to which the citizenry had given its consent“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 42). Not “violence [is] the prerequisite for power“ but “sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 55). Arendt explicitly emphasizes that power is the primary and decisive factor. “Even the totalitarian ruler,“ she writes, “needs a power basis - the secret police and its net of informers” (Arendt, 1970, p. 51). Even during revolutions, the result does not seem to be based on violence, but on the power behind it.

Nevertheless, Arendt is realistic enough to know that “in the head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome is hardly in doubt“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 54). Such as the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, or, to add some more recent events, the Tiananmen Square massacre in the summer of 1989, or the storming of Tahir Square in Cairo in the winter of 2011. “Out of the barrel of a gun,“ says Arendt, “grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power” (Arendt, 1970, p. 54).

Violence occurs where power is weakened or crumbling. Violence can indeed destroy power, but in doing so it threatens its own power basis. Once violence has lost its power basis, then, according to Arendt, "the well-known reversal in reckoning with means and ends has taken place. The means, the means of destruction, now determine the end - with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all power" (Arendt, 1970, p. 56).

#### 4. Totalitarian terror

Arendt illustrates this self-destructive element of violence's victory over power in the reign of terror. „Terror is not the same as violence“, she writes (Arendt, 1970, p. 56). She is referring to the reign of terror that replaces a reign of violence. Terror involves violence, but it goes beyond it, because it is characteristic of totalitarian oppression that it destroys power and plurality. It is characteristic of such systems - and here Arendt refers to two examples of the 20th century, the totalitarian rule under Hitler after 1938 and the terror of the Stalin regime from 1930 onwards - that terror does not end.

Arendt's writings on the phenomenon of violence also include several earlier works on politics, power and violence. In her article "Totalitarian Propaganda" she defines terror as "the very essence of its [totalitarianism's] form of government" (Arendt, 1950-51, p. 242). "Terror," she writes, "continues to be used by totalitarian regimes" (Arendt, 1950-51, p. 241). In this context, the use of terror in totalitarian regimes has nothing to do with "the existence of opponents", nor did the use of violence play a greater role "as a mere reinforcement of political propaganda". It is true that the National Socialists "made a certain capital out of the murders of prominent politicians such as Rathenau or Erzberger [...]" (Arendt, 1950-51, p. 243), but this kind of terror was not exercised because of the "importance of the murdered persons", but in order to "make it clear to the population at large that the power of the Nazis was greater than that of the authorities and that it was safer to be a member of a Nazi paramilitary organisation than a loyal Republican" (Arendt, 1950-51, p. 243). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt states that totalitarian rule, once it has come to power, does everything it can to destroy the remnants of a common world and to further atomise people including through terror. It substitutes for "the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron that holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions" (Arendt, 1951, p. 465). In this way, the space of action, the very world that is created between people whenever they come together and speak or act with each other, is destroyed. By trying to keep

people literally “incommunicado”, i.e. by depriving them of the possibility to exchange and communicate about what is actually happening, total domination destroys the basis of action.

Totalitarian rule is not only a modern form of tyranny, as such it would be content with “destroying the political sphere of people, i.e. preventing action and creating powerlessness” (Arendt, 1996, p. 974), but it becomes “truly totalitarian”, when it “on the one hand (destroys) all the relationships between people that remain after the disappearance of the political-public sphere and (when it) on the other hand (forces) that those who are thus completely isolated and abandoned by each other can be reinstated for political activities (although of course not for real political action)” (Arendt, 1996, p. 975).

Where terror begins to “choose its victims based on objective criteria, regardless of what they have thought or done”, hearts are devastated and “relationships between people are poisoned”. It is no longer possible to talk in families because the bonds of trust have been broken up. Human contacts in the “oases”, i.e. spheres of life beyond politics, have been destroyed. “This atomization“, writes Arendt in *On Violence*, “an outrageously pale, academic word for the horror it implies is maintained and intensified through the ubiquity of the informer, who can be literally omnipresent because he no longer is merely a professional agent in the pay of the police but potentially every person one comes into contact with“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 56).

Totalitarian terror, Arendt makes clear, is different from the terror of tyranny and the terror of revolution. “Wherever we find terror in the past“, she writes in *Mankind and Terror* (1953) an essay written at around the same time as her book on totalitarianism and originally broadcast in German by RIAS Rundfunk in March 1953, “it is rooted in the use of force that originates outside the law and in many cases is consciously applied to tear down the fences of law that protect human freedom and guarantee citizens freedoms and rights“ (Arendt, 1994, 298).

The terror of tyranny differs from totalitarian terror in that the former comes to an end as soon as “the opposition is destroyed”, whereas the latter first begins “when the regime has no more enemies who can be arrested and tortured to death and when even the different classes of suspects are eliminated and can no longer be taken into ‘protective custody’“ (Arendt, 1994, 299).

Typically, a totalitarian regime does not pass new laws, but rather maintains terror as a power that functions outside the law. Consequently, totalitarian terror does not care about laws; more than that, the very concept of law changes, i.e. “all laws [...] become a façade” whose function is



to permanently remind the population “that the laws, no matter what their nature or origin, do not really matter” (Arendt, 1994, 300).

The phenomenon of totalitarian terror, which only roams free when there is no more opposition (Arendt, 1994, p. 303; Arendt, 1996, p. 910), can only be understood if terror is not seen as a means to achieve an end, but as an end in itself. The meaning of totalitarian terror can be properly understood by looking at the concentration- and extermination camps as they reveal two characteristics of totalitarian terror. One is that the camps are not about forced labor, but about treating the inmates as if they had never existed. “Even if they happen to keep alive, [they] are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion” (Arendt, 1996, p. 915). Second, that the government decides in advance who will be deported and liquidated. Thus, the Nazi regime declared non-German ethnic groups to be enemies of the regime, the Bolshevik regime liquidated people who belonged to those groups that were “labeled members of so-called ‘dying classes’” (Arendt, 1994, p. 301).

While totalitarian terror under Hitler demonstrated that millions can vanish in concentration camps without a chance to defend themselves against totalitarian terror, the so-called show trials under Stalin demonstrated that it can happen to anyone, that no one except the leader is protected from deportation and liquidation. Former high-ranking party members and police agents are as likely to become victims as perpetrators of the regime. Both facts, the isolation of the camps from the outside world and the extermination of the most seasoned supporters, belong together. Both mean that human beings in their infinite variation and unique individuality become superfluous (Arendt, 1994, p. 304). Totalitarian terror is no longer a means to an end, but the essence of total domination. “The climax of terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, when yesterday’s executioner becomes today’s victim” (Arendt, 1970, p. 57).

## **5. Violence is neither ‘bestly’ nor ‘irrational’**

Violence does not only play a role as a form of interaction, i.e. in the relations between people, but the violent aspect has a broader meaning in Arendt’s thinking. Arendt distinguishes between three basic activities: labor, work and action. “Labor corresponds to the biological process of the human body. [...] Work produces an artificial world of things that do not simply associate themselves with natural things, but differ from them in that they resist nature to a certain extent and are not simply worn down by the living processes. Human life, which by nature is homeless in nature, is at home in

this world of things” (Arendt, 1967, p. 16). Action corresponds to the basic human condition of plurality.

The sheer endless variety of fabricated things adds up to the world built by human beings. Now, all fabrication contains an element of violence, for *homo faber*, insofar as he is the creator of an artificial world, must first obtain the material from which he then makes the tools, devices and instruments he needs for his fabrication. “Material”, Arendt writes, “is already a product of human hands which have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature’s slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth. This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature (Arendt, 1967, p. 165).

Violence is thus part of the instrumental logic of a fabricated world inhabited by acting and speaking people. From the perspective of power, violence is negative as it can destroy power but for purely instrumental fabrication, on the other hand, violence is unavoidable.

If violence is inevitable, does this mean that it is part of human nature and that behavioral research can shed light on it? Konrad Lorenz’s famous book *Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression* (1963) triggered disputes in the 1960s, and that not only in the field of behavioral research, but also in new disciplines such as “ethology” (biology of behaviour) and “polemology” (war studies).

Arendt not only doubted that zoologists, for example, could find out anything about the problem of violence between human beings, but she also feared that the new disciplines would produce highly undesirable results that were not consistent with the phenomenon of violence. For the end result of these studies made the act of violence or the aggressive drive appear even more “natural” and attributed to it an even greater role in human coexistence than we are already prepared to assume. She feared that behind the latest discoveries lay one of the oldest definitions of human nature, according to which man is an “*animal rationale*”, a rational animal that, insofar as it is rational, is not likely to be violent. What now distinguishes man from an animal is “no longer reason (...) but science” (Arendt, 1970, p. 63). If he is violent, then he “acts irrationally and like a beast if he refuses to listen to the scientists” (Arendt, 1970, p. 63).

According to Arendt, however, violence is not beastly, but stems from human feelings such as rage or indignation as a reaction to outrageous

circumstances that offend our sense of justice. The fact that our reactions can be backed by such feelings does not make the violence irrational; “the opposite of emotional is not ‘rational’, whatever that may mean“, because “in order to respond reasonably one must first of all be ‘moved’“, but “either the inability to be moved [...], or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 65). Rage and violence only become irrational when they “are directed against substitutes” (Arendt, 1970, p. 65).

## 6. Violence can never be legitimate

Indignation and the act of violence that may follow it are one thing, glorification of violence for its own sake is another. From her “humanist” perspective, Arendt views the acts of violence of the black riots in the 1960s, as “articulate protests against genuine grievances“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 76), and as “perfectly rational reaction“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 76). Without hesitation, she quotes Conor Cruise O’Brien, one of the leading intellectuals of the Irish Labour Party, who remarked that violence “can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention. [...] ‘Sometimes, violence is the only way of ensuring a hearing for moderation.’ To ask the impossible in order to obtain the possible“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 78). What Arendt is able to do is to distinguish between the essentially non-violent initial stages be it in the struggle for civil rights or in the resistance movement against the war in Vietnam and a public climate in which certain phrases only serve to disguise that people are succumbing to the “glorification of violence” (Arendt, 1970, p. 18).

Arendt admired the 1968 generation for their courage and “appetite for action” (Arendt, 1970, p. 19). But she was also alarmed by the shrill rhetoric of the student rebellion and the growth of the Black Power movement, for whom “violence [...] was not a matter of theory and rhetoric“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 22). She firmly rejected any attempt to legitimize violence *per se*.

Franz Fanon’s book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) became a kind of creed for many students and served to legitimize violence. As did Karl Marx’s assertion that no new society can emerge without violence, as well as George Sorel’s claim that violence is essentially creative or Jean Paul Sartre’s proposition that violence creates man. These attempts by Marx, Sorel and Sartre to legitimize violence meet with opposition from Arendt. Her main criticism is directed against Sartre’s peculiar blend of Marxism and existentialism, a blend that puts him in fundamental opposition to Marx, such as when he claims that this “irrepressible violence... is man recreating himself“, or then in preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* he writes, “To shoot

down a European is to kill two birds with one stone... there remain a dead man and a free man“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 17). She recognizes in the rhetoric of the New Left violent ideas backed by Sartre’s formula: “Violence [...] like Achilles’ lance, can heal the wounds it has inflicted“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 23), which, in her opinion, are more detached from reality than Sorel’s myth of the general strike. For Sartre, violence is not a marginal phenomenon, but rather violence and counter-violence dominate history; Arendt, on the other hand, insists that “violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to the public attention“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 78).

### 7. Neither fascination with violence nor pacifism

The fact that in her essay *On Violence* Arendt is not prepared to endorse violence as a means to bring about the end of war in Vietnam does not mean that she was a pacifist as a matter of principle. Having escaped from the Gurs camp in southern France and landed in New York with her husband and mother in 1941, she wrote as a columnist for *Aufbau*, an immigrant newspaper that became the central publication of German-speaking Jewry in all those countries where Jews were still able to live freely during the Second World War. In her contributions, she advocated the Jewish people’s struggle for freedom. In November 1941, in her column entitled “The Jewish Army—The beginning of Jewish Politics?“, she called on the Jewish people to fight “with weapons in hand for their freedom and the right to live as a people“ (Knott, 2000, p. 23).

During the Vietnam War, she also supported a group called “The Resistance“, whose members destroyed their draft cards (Knott, 2000, p. 194). She donated \$100 to their political efforts. But when Mary McCarthy asked her in her letter of 19 December 1967, “Did you participate in the protests of our friends?“ (Brightman, 1997, p. 311), Arendt replied, “I did not participate in resistance activities“ (Brightman, 1997, p. 318). As a kind of explanation, she adds, “The ‘activists’ are in a mood for violence, and of course so are the Black-Power-people“ (Brightman, 1997, p. 318; Baselow and Ludz, 2016, p. 194).

But that does not mean that she is a pacifist. Indeed, in 1973, she gave the following reply to Dwight Macdonald when he invited her to join the War Resisters League, an international pacifist organization to which he himself belonged:

I hate to say ,no' to you, but I feel I cannot join the War Resisters League. I am not a Pacifist either in the 'relative' or the 'absolute' sense and I am not sure that I would 'refuse to support any kind of war', as you put it. You know of course that I supported the war against Hitler rather enthusiastically. Today, evidently, one could not support any war between the great powers because of nuclear weapons [...]. Pacifism, at any rate, is not likely to save us. (Baselow and Ludz, 2016, p. 195)

Indeed, Arendt not only supported the war against Hitler, but also other wars, such as the Israeli Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in the autumn of 1973 (Baselow and Ludz, 2016, p. 196). On the other hand, she joined the protest against the Vietnam War, but in a non-violent way. She supported "The Fellowship of Reconciliation", a branch of the Catholic Worker, as well as a number of other pacifist groups (Baselow and Ludz, 2016, p. 196). And she contributed to covering the cost of the "Congress End the War" ad printed by the New York Times by donating from her private library a copy of the first edition of Immanuel Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden* and a cheque for \$50 (Baselow and Ludz, 2016, p. 196; Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 452).

When it came to the question of whether or not to support a particular war, she apparently reserved the right to decide for herself in each case. This does not change her view that there is a clear boundary between power and violence. "There are no quantitative or qualitative transitions between power and violence," she writes; "neither can power be derived from violence nor violence from power, neither can power be understood as the gentle mode of violence nor violence as the most flagrant manifestation of power" (Arendt, 1970, p. 58).

As already said, violence is instrumental by its very nature; it may be rational for short-term goals. But even if it is consciously kept within a framework of short-term goals, if the goals are not achieved quickly, there is a danger that violence will be introduced "into the whole body politic" (Arendt, 1970, p. 79). It is true that 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).

How can this be countered? By not letting local sources of power seep away or dry up. Or to put it another way, by having a "participatory democracy" in which "people feel that they are acting together" (Arendt, 1970, p. 83). Because "what makes man a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the



desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift - to embark on something new“ (Arendt, 1970, p. 81).

We do not know where the seemingly unstoppable development of technology will lead us, “but we know, or should know,” Arendt concludes, “that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence - if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it” (Arendt, 1970, p. 86).

## 8. Concluding remarks

The ideal of politics as acting and speaking together in the public sphere, which Arendt develops in *The Human Condition*, enables her to disentangle the fundamental confusion between fabrication and action, between violence and power. She carefully distinguishes power from violence:

Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence. [...] what keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed [...] and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power. [...] And without power, the space of appearance brought forth through action and speech in public will fade away as rapidly as the living deed and the living word. (Arendt, 1967, p. 252f.)

Moreover, “power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty [...] and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt, 1967, p. 252; Knauer, 1980, p. 728).

Violence can destroy legitimate power, but it never can create power. Violent acts can be “inspired by compassion and a burning desire for justice” (Arendt, 1970, p. 66), but according to her, “the tactics of violence and disruption make sense only for short-term goals” (Arendt, 1970, p. 79). Most important, Arendt is quite clear that “violence is not and cannot be politically instrumental for two reasons. Firstly, because the instrumental reasoning that underlies the use of violence is antithetical to politics, because it identifies politics mistakenly with the achievement of pre-defined ends. Secondly, in any case, because those who confuse violence with power, misunderstand the inherently unpredictable consequences of violence” (Frazer and Hutchings, 2008, p. 103). Consequently, she argues, “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).

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