Against violence, but not at any price: Hannah Arendt's concept of power *[1]

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ABSTRACT. Hannah Arendt reproaches our tradition of political philosophy for reducing politics to *domination*, and for so concealing the central political phenomenon, i.e., *power* (section one). Since Arendt's own concept of power is an extension of her concept of *action*, she understands power in a both non-hierarchical and non-instrumental way, as much distinct from domination as from violence. Furthermore, by stressing the essential *relational* and *potential* character of power, she shows the impossibility of human omnipotence (section two). Section three sketches Arendt's analysis of violent action as an instrumental, mute and solitary activity, which can destroy, but never generate power, and which, therefore, can never be more than a poor substitute for acting together. However, the priority of power over violence is not absolute: sometimes power needs violence to maintain itself. Arendt seems to recognize this, but nowhere elaborates it (see the concluding remarks).

KEYWORDS. Domination, force, power (and action), strength, violence

Introduction

Phenomenology as the art of making distinctions

Do politicians ever learn from the past? To judge from the current foreign policy of the United States of America, the question must be answered negatively. Just as during the Vietnam War, the 'world's most powerful nation' is once again refusing to see in its Iraq intervention and the worldwide 'war against terrorism' that superiority in terms of weaponry is not enough to defeat a small but well organized and hard-to-locate enemy. And in both cases, the rock-steady and, at first blush, irrefutable conviction that the ends justify the means leads to nasty and

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shameful excesses: the use of napalm bombs and mass murder in My Lai in the first case, and prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay in the second. Moreover, in its war on terror, America is playing the lone rider: it scarcely cares about the decisions of the UN and, sovereign, takes the law into its own hands. In so doing, America leaves no doubt that the law of the strongest is in effect. The question that will occupy us here is whether it is showing its power, or its distressing weakness.

The distinction between power and violence is only one of the many, often surprising distinctions in Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology. Because these distinctions stand largely at odds with the main currents of the philosophical and academic tradition, they cause resentment. The question could be raised if there is indeed more to it than obstinacy and chicanery. According to Paul Ricoeur, we must reverse the question and ask ourselves, along with Arendt, what hides behind the traditional conceptual *confusions*. Her distinctions do not simply appear out of thin air, but are the result of a careful dismantling of a concealing manner of thinking (Ricoeur 1989, 143). For, Arendt reproaches political philosophy and political science precisely for the inability to distinguish, for example, between tyrannical (or dictatorial), authoritarian, and totalitarian governments: this distinction is dismissed by holding that these forms of government ultimately have the same *function* – to curtail freedom – and thus only differ from each other by degree, and not in essence (Arendt 1983, 96-97). The same fate befalls the difference between power and violence, or that between power and authority.

According to Arendt, the indiscriminate use of these and other terms not only indicates "deafness to linguistic meanings," but ultimately also "blindness to the realities they correspond to" (1972, 142). For, a difference in words usually points to a difference in the phenomenon itself, and protracted synonymous use of the words erases that difference. Such a levelling-off points out "that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness" (1983, 95). Hence, Arendt sets herself against what she calls

"the silent agreement … among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions … and that … each of us has the right 'to define his terms'" (*ibid.*). Rather than an expression of chicanery, this opposition is the hallmark of *watchful* thinking that 'will save the phenomena (*soozein ta phainomena*)' and will clear up the terminological mist that the political tradition has spread. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl thus correctly holds that Arendt "practiced a kind of phenomenology, though she seldom used the term and usually felt that the less said about method the better" (1984, 405). Very often, her analyses depart from the *words* through which things are brought to speech: that can be the word of the historian, such as in the clarification of the concept of *impartiality* at the hands of Herodotus and Thucydides (see Arendt 1983, 51-52), or the word of the poet, such as in the analysis of the Roman *foundation* at the hand of Virgil (see 1973b, 210 ff.), but Arendt also departs from the words of those who were directly involved in the deeds (such as in the case of modern revolutions, whereby she continually points to the Founding Fathers of the United States of America).

1. Domination as concealment of power

What is more plausible than the thought that politics is an affair of dominance and subjugation, whereby one person orders another around, and imposes and compels his will upon the other, through force if necessary? The reduction of politics to domination governs the entire tradition of political philosophy and political science: it is not only demonstrable in the modern idea of the sovereign nation state in Bodin and Hobbes, but also in the manner in which ancient philosophy defined the different forms of government (monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy). The ancient vocabulary is consolidated by the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its imperative view of the law (analogous to God's commandments), and pressed forth in the modern and contemporary views of human nature:

in J.S. Mill, there is talk about a natural desire to exercise power over others, and contemporary ethologists and socio-biologists speak of an inborn domination-instinct, with its attendant inborn aggressivity (see Arendt 1972, 137-38).

This reduction of politics to domination – completed in 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 1972, 134) – is, in the eyes of Arendt, practically the original sin of the tradition. *First*, domination-relationships do not derive from the public sphere, despite the immense role that they have played there, and continue to play, but from a *pre-political* sphere, i.e., the private sphere of the household (or the economy) and the family: the head of the family rules as a despot (see Arendt 1983, 105 and 1958, 26-27). Its original model is the relation between master and slave. The most important origin of domination (and thus also of slavery)[6] lies, according to Arendt, in the human desire to liberate oneself from the concern of maintaining one's life, and until the emergence of modern technology, this liberation could only be realized by compelling others to bear the burden of life (and thus of labour). According to Arendt, only modern technology and not politics is capable of refuting the ancient and terrible proposition that (some) people can only be liberated by domination and violence (see Arendt, 1973b, 114). *Second*: precisely because domination is a pre-political phenomenon, the reduction of politics to domination leads inevitably to a concealment of the political phenomenon *par excellence*, i.e., power, which according to Arendt "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (1972, 143), but which, through the tradition, is mostly deformed into an affair of commanding and obeying.[2] *Third*: whoever understands power as domination, also erases the difference between *power* and *violence*. Violence then emerges in the extension of power, and can be seen as its ultimate manifestation, as in Wright Mills: "All politics is struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence."[3] In contrast to this, Arendt will propose that violence appears particularly where power fades away, and that

As is known, the condition of action is plurality, which in its turn is characterized both by distinction and equality. For this reason, power can only be thought of as an egalitarian and non-hierarchical relation between people. Power answers to what Arendt calls "sheer human togetherness," a life "*with* others and neither for or against them" (1958, 180).[5] Accordingly, to act is essentially to begin or to initiate, and not to order or to compel. This thought enables us to understand two characteristics of power: on the one hand, its spontaneous, unpredictable character – "power springs up" (1958, 200) – which answers to the spontaneous, 'natal' character of action (the 1958 Hungarian revolution against the Soviet invasion can serve here as an example); on the other, power does not rest upon subjugation and obedience, but upon consent (with the initiative) and support (for the initiative taker or the beginning itself).[6] This non-hierarchical concept of power is echoed in Arendt's concept of the law. The laws of the political community must be thought of as *directives* that are 'accepted,' rather than as *imperatives* that are 'imposed.' The 'obedience' to laws is comparable to the manner in which people who wish to play a game agree with the rules (see Arendt 1972, appendix XI, 193).

The non-instrumental character of power can also be understood from action. *First*, action does not get its meaning from a goal outside itself, because it cannot be equated with fabrication or work. The Aristotelian concept of reality (*energeia*), which Arendt connects with action as performance or praxis, also applies to power: power is "an end in itself" (1972, 150). With this, Arendt does not want "to deny that governments pursue policies and employ their power to achieve prescribed goals," but to 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" (1972, 150). Insofar as power is inherent in political communities and "government is essentially organized and institutionalized power" (1972, 150), power has no other end than "the preservation of the space of appearance out of which it springs" (Enegrén 1984,

105; my translation). *Second*, action takes place as speech, or is accompanied by speech. Thus, power also arises in acts of language, and never out of a purely instrumental-technical wordless activity, and it depends on the exchange of words.[7]

2.2. A positive characterization

To bend this chiefly negative characterization of power into a positive one – insofar as this is possible, because power in Arendt, like *Sein* in Heidegger, is not *something* – we can proceed from Arendt's already cited basic formula from "On Violence": "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (1972, 143). Removed from its context, this formula could mistakenly suggest that collective deliberation is not truly a necessary condition for being able to speak about *action* – which Arendt however denies most certainly: "The simple truth is that no man can act alone" (1978, Vol. II, 180).[8] Action is only possible "'in concert,' in company and agreement with our peers" (1978, Vol. I, 91). The concept of action thus remains, also for a positive concept of power, the first guideline.

The basic formula concerning power says in fact that power can never be a property of the individual: power "belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (1972, 143). Taken strictly, however, power cannot be considered as the 'property' of the group. It is not something that, either by individuals or the group, can be considered as a possession: "However, nobody actually possesses power; it exists between people, when they act together... [*Macht aber besitzt eigentlich niemand, sie entsteht zwischen Menschen, wenn sie zusammen handeln...*] (1981, 194)." Power must be understood as *relation*: it exists only relationally in a plurality. The 'place' of power falls together with the space of appearance, which emerges *between* acting and speaking people. Power is what maintains this interspace – it is nothing but its cohesion (see Enegrén 1984, 100). The relationality of power is the companion of the proper

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'productivity' of action – the fact that it inevitably brings about relations. In the same vein, Jean-Luc Nancy points to a *clinamen* or *inclination*, without which no political community can manage, but which never turns into a fusion, since the community has to be thought of as *le partage* or *l'exposition* of singular, finite beings (see 1990, 17 and 86 ff.). Arendt also does not think of the community as a fusion: "Politics is about the being-together and being-with-one-another of *different people* [*Politik handelt von dem Zusammen- und Miteinander-Sein der* Verschiedenen]" (1993, 9). The plurality of unique and equal beings consists alone in and through the *in-between* among people: outside this there is no talk of uniqueness or distinction, nor of equality or any form of commonality, but only of the sameness or 'unitedness' of many in one (see 1958, 214-215). Thus, Arendt's opposition to every attempt to think the political community along the lines of the family, in which plurality is fused together into a new type of individual: in such an organizational form, the original difference is dissolved and even less is there still talk of a well understood equality (see 1993, 10).

The relationality of power must be thought together with a second important character trait – namely, its *potentiality*. For, power is no immutable, measurable, and even less a storable quantity such as force (which one can eventually use) or strength (which one does or does not possess), but a *potential* entity – which is already expressed in both the Greek and Latin words for power: *dunamis* and *potentia*.[9] Power always is and remains a potential power, the potentiality in togetherness. To factually exist, it must be actualized: "power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (1958, 200). Arendt thus thinks of power as a potentiality that can only be actualized but never fully materialized.

Two elements, equal in importance, come forth from this definition: one the one hand, the necessity of power to be continually actualized anew – it does not have the permanence and stability of the enduring actual – and on the other, the effective activity of power as an immaterial actuality.[10] With the *first element*, Arendt does justice to the inescapable

transience and fleetingness of the space of appearance (and *the human affairs* or political realm in general): even in the apparently most stable relations, this space never entirely loses its potential character. Power cannot be stored and kept in reserve for the future: it must continually emerge anew. Thus it is also clear that the potentiality of power may not be understood as an underlying substrate or a pre-given potential being that simply waits for its realization or actualization (like in the relation of the seed to the plant). The potentiality rather points at what constitutes the core of human freedom: the spontaneity of acting together as the ability to begin, and so points at the natality of action. The *second element* stresses the effective activity of the actualized, but immaterial power: "power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either numbers or means" (Arendt 1958, 200). Here, Arendt points out not only the sometimes surprising power of small, but well organized groups, but also the irresistible power that can proceed from a nonviolent popular revolt.[11] The only material factor that is required for the emergence of power is the coexistence of people: hence, the paradigmatic character of the Greek city states for every Western political organization (see 1958, 2001). In "On Violence," this thought is nuanced. There Arendt says, in connection with the difference between power and violence, "that power always *stands in need of numbers*, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements." And further on, we read: "The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All" (1972, 140-141). In comparison with violence, which needs instruments, power needs numbers. However, if one looks at power in itself, then it is not the size of the group that is decisive for the size of the power, but indeed the intensity of the 'acting and speaking together': in other words, the measure in which the potential power is actualized.

If power were not essentially characterized by relationality and potentiality, then *omnipotence* would belong among the human possibilities, because just as action, power would be in a position to break open all limitations. In *Vita Activa*, it runs: "The limits of power do not lie in itself, but rather

in the simultaneous existence of other power groups, thus in the presence-at-hand of others who are outside one's own sphere of power and produce power on their own [*Die Grenze der Macht liegt nicht in ihr selbst, sondern in der gleichzeitigen Existenz anderer Machtgruppen, also in dem Vorhandensein von Anderen, die ausserhalb des eigenen Machtbereichs stehen und selber Macht entwickeln*]" (1981,195). What limits power (and thus makes omnipotence impossible) is simultaneously what makes it possible (as non-omnipotent power) – namely, an effectively existing plurality: power degenerates and withers away if it is monopolized (see 1972, 182). Arendt holds that when everyday language speaks of a 'powerful man' or a 'powerful personality,' it is speaking figuratively – "what we refer to without metaphor is 'strength'" (1972, 143)[12] – or it simply involves "the fallacy of the strong man who is powerful because he is alone" (1958, 190). However, in opposition to strength, which just like power is limited by the presence of others (and their strength), plurality limits power not only in a restrictive but in a fruitful manner as well: namely, power *magnifies* if it is divided and spread throughout the entire public space, while strength is simply indivisible. This reciprocity between different powers, which control and keep each other in balance, can only bring more power into existence on the condition that the reciprocity is effective and not bogged down in a deadlock (see 1958, 201). "Power can be stopped *and* be kept intact only by power" (1973b, 151).[13] Or in the words of André Enegrén: "Plural, it [i.e., power] grows inversely to its concentration and in proportion to its diffusion [*Pluriel, il [i.e. le pouvoir] croît en raison inverse de sa concentration et en proportion de sa diffusion*]" (1984, 107). Arendt's preference for federal states, but also her admiring sympathy for revolutionary councils, is directly related to this positive valuation of the essentially plural power.

Where power and strength oppose one another, the outcome is predictable: thanks to its 'divisibility,' power can always persevere in the face of the individual's isolated and 'indivisible' strength. Power corrupts into *ochlocracy* or mob rule when the 'weak,' out of envy and jealousy, turn against the strong individual (see 1958, 203),[14] and with that, also the plurality of

unique beings threatens to fold into a pure numerical plurality, an undifferentiated mass of lonely people standing next to but apart from one another. (For that matter, this is one of the few passages in which Arendt expresses herself about power in negative phrasing. What is striking here is precisely her positive valuation of power as the central political phenomenon – which does not mean that she would be blind to its dangers[15] – which shrilly contradicts the widely spread and practically unanimous opinion that power always and necessarily corrupts.) The precise opposite of ochlocracy or mob rule, which replaces strength with power and which can be considered as the extreme form of power ('All against One'), is tyranny ('One against All'), which replaces power with violence, but which thereby simultaneously destroys the political space in the sense of the 'in-between' and thus is only able to produce *impotence*. Arendt here follows Montesquieu, for whom the proper character of tyranny lies in the isolation, not only of the tyrant opposite his subjects, but also of his subjects among each other mutually. Tyranny destroys the possibility of acting and speaking together, which is the condition of possibility for any form of government: thereby, tyranny places itself opposite to all other forms of government.

Whoever is searching for an alternative to power should not call upon strength – for it is powerless in the face of power – but upon *force* or *violence*. Force can be used by one person against another, and also be monopolized by one or a few by securing the means of violence.

3. Violence

3.1. Terminology

A terminological discussion is fitting here. For Arendt, the instrumental character of violence is its hallmark. Phenomenologically seen, it is close to strength, because just like all other tools, the means of violence are intended and are also used to multiply natural strength (also force of

labour) and possibly, in the last phase of its development, to replace it completely (see 1972, 145). In the first place, violence in this sense comprises a part of work or fabrication – "we must kill a tree in order to have lumber, and we must violate this material in order to build a table" (1983, 111). Violence that people carry out upon one another and the world as a means of compelling or dominating each other is, in a way, already a derivative form of violence, which is transferred from the field of work or fabrication to the field of action and interpersonal relations: the compulsion carried out on the material is turned into a compulsion carried out on people.

In keeping with everyday language, Arendt frequently uses the word 'force' for this interpersonal violence as a means of compulsion. Terminologically, however, she wants to reserve this word to indicate the forces of nature or the force of circumstances (*la force des choses*), i.e., the energy that is released by physical and social movements (see 1972, 143-144). Thus, Arendt talks about the irresistibility of the French Revolution, which, as a torrent, swept away everything and everyone in its path (1973b, 48). Then again, this terminological use of 'force' partially overlaps with the term 'necessity' – the translation of the Greek *anagkè*, necessity that compels irresistibly and against which absolutely no violence carried out by humans, except torture, can measure (1958, 129). In this context, 'necessity' must not be understood as the contrary to coincidence, but to freedom. The 'domain of necessity' points out, in the first place, the bodily (and probably also the psychical) needs and requirements that necessitate humans to labour, i.e., "the necessity of biological life itself" (1973b, 112) – but, additionally, also the mental sphere, namely the compulsion of truth, which is indeed non-violent, but no less compelling (see Arendt 1983, 240).

The following analysis of violence deals especially with what everyday language indicates with the word 'force': violence that people carry out upon one another and the world (*bia, violentia*) as a means of compulsion or domination, and that can be defined as "mute, physical compulsion

through instruments, which is purposefully carried out" (Penta 1985, 71). The obviousness with which political theory accepts this violence as an essential component of politics – such as in Weber's earlier cited definition of the state, or in Clausewitz's opinion of war as "the continuation of politics by other means" (see Arendt 1972, 110) – is, for Arendt, in line with the basic assumption of this theory, namely that politics essentially amounts to domination. It is this opinion that muffles power and bends it into the expression of force: how, then, can we hold back the thought that violence is the most efficient form of carrying out power? Arendt, to the contrary, wants to display the contradistinction between power and violence: power forms the 'middle' or 'centre' of the political, and violence its limit.

3.2. The hallmarks of violence

Just like power can be clarified through *action*, violence can be clarified through *work* or *fabrication*. The activity of *homo faber* is purposefully instrumental and mute (in the sense of wordless); moreover, work is carried out in isolation: not plurality, but the world – in the sense of *artefact* – is the specific condition for work.

One finds these same hallmarks in Arendt's characterization of violent 'action.' *First*, in contrast to non-instrumental and non-materializable power, violence is essentially instrumental and material. Violent action is thoroughly governed by the categories of means and end, and therefore inescapably relies on instruments (such as corporeal strength and weapons) – precisely as the work of a craftsman relies on tools. Next, as an essentially instrumental activity, violence can derive its accountability or justification exclusively from the end it serves. The more remote the intended goal is from us in time, the more difficult is it for this justification to sound believable. Precisely in this need for justification by a future goal, violence differs fundamentally from power: because power is not a means for an external goal, but an end in itself, it does not need the sort

of justification that one asks for means. Power, according to Arendt, stands in need of something else: namely, 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" (1972, 151, my emphasis). Power legitimates or warrants itself by appealing to the past. By contrast, "violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate" (1972, 151).

Second, violence is mute: "The point ... is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence" (Arendt 1973b, 19). Therefore Arendt can say: "Where violence rules absolutely ... not only the laws ... but everything and everybody must fall silent" (1973b, 18). This muteness makes violence politically marginal, and even an anti-political phenomenon. Referring to life in the polis, Aristotle defined the human being as a 'political' and a 'speaking' animal (*zoôn politikon* and *zoôn logon echon*): both determinations belong together and supplement each other. Violence destroys precisely the solidarity of word and deed that is necessary for action. Without speech, action degrades into a merely productive, technological activity (see Arendt 1958, 179). No space of appearance can emerge out of such a wordless activity. And thus expires the basic condition for the awakening of power:

> 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 (1958, 200).

Wherever word and deed part company, the way is prepared for violence: "Words used for the purpose of fighting lose their quality of speech; they become clichés" (1994, 308). And the measure to which these clichés take possession of our daily conversations and debates is the metric for our readiness to reach for the means of violence.

Third, violence is characterized by its preference for isolation. Its extreme form is 'One against All,' such as in tyranny. This is, on the one hand, understandable insofar as violence has its origin in work, and on the other, in terms of its speechlessness: without speech, there can no longer be any uncovering (or revealing) of the *who*: "The weapon commander is anonymous and remains interchangeable [*Der Waffenführer is anonym und beliebig austauschbar*]" (Penta 1985, 66). The combination of instrumentality and muteness makes violence into a solitary 'activity' or 'doing' that is not capable of bringing relations into existence. Strong group cohesion and even 'brotherhood' in expressing collective violence (such as a suicide squad) change nothing, according to Arendt: these are only a consequence of a collective and short-lived confrontation, in the action, with death. Ultimately death, even if it is the strongest 'equalizer,' is the strongest anti-political experience that exists: it means that we will forsake the world and the company of people. Thus politics, in pre-philosophical political thinking, is seen precisely as a means to distinguish oneself and to achieve immortal fame, and thus to escape the equality of the grave (see 1972, 165-166).

3.3. The contradistinction between power and violence

Although Arendt admits that power and violence are actually not separated from each other in water-tight compartments – "... nothing ... is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form" (1972, 145-46) – still, she thinks that we are dealing here with thoroughly different, indeed, opposing phenomena. And against the accepted opinion that violence is a prerequisite for power – the governmental power, for example, is only a façade or "the velvet glove which either conceals the iron hand or will turn out to belong to a paper tiger" (1972, 146) – Arendt explicitly posits the *priority of power over violence*: "Wherever they are combined, power ... is the primary and predominant factor" (1972, 151).

Thus, absolutely no government, no matter how great its means of violence, can survive without a power basis and thus the support or the consent of the people, or at least part of them. Even the totalitarian ruler, who rules through terror and torture, cannot survive without the support of his secret police and network of informants. Only robot soldiers, totally eliminating the human factor, would be able to undo the essential prevalence of power over violence (see Arendt 1972, 149). Even in revolutions, the outcome eventually seems to depend not on the means of violence themselves, but on the power behind the violence: usually, the government still in power will be superior in terms of the means of violence, but this prevalence will only be to its advantage as long as its power structure remains intact; i.e., as long as the army and police are prepared to obey its orders and to use their weapons. If this is no longer the case, then the rebellion will not be put down, and the weapons will change camps. Whether or not the army follows orders is, according to Arendt, not primarily a question of domination, but of opinion, and of the numbers sharing that opinion. According to her, through the possible, sudden collapse of power, which typifies a pre-revolutionary climate, one can learn precisely that obedience – to laws, rulers, and institutions – is ultimately the final manifestation of support and consent (see 1972, 147-148), or that "in politics, obedience and support are the same" (1973b, 228).

Of course, when violence and power in pure form oppose one another, such as in the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the situation is completely different.[16] In such a case, violence can indeed soundly destroy power – but also no more than that. The priority of power over violence also appears here. The substitution of violence for power is thus always an expression of a loss of power – only then that substitution becomes attractive – and even if it brings victory and thus seems worthwhile, it is always repaid with a further loss of power. In this connection, Arendt points to the danger, proper to violence, of the reversal of the relation between the destructive means of violence and the intended goal. "When violence is no longer backed and restrained by

power, the well-known reversal in reckoning with means and ends has taken place ... with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all power" (1972, 153). The external form of this destruction is the totalitarian *terror* or that form of government in which violence never abdicates and that, in contrast to violent tyrants or dictators, turns not only against the power of its enemies, but also against that of its own friends and supporters. Total paralysis is the result (see 1972, 154-155).

Power and violence are opposites, but not dialectically: they do not melt together to bring about a higher state of affairs, and even less do they have a common root. When either pole rules in its pure form, the other is absent. Violence appears when power is threatened or fails, but left to itself, violence can only end in the disappearance of power. That implies that violence can never be understood through power: it must be understood through its own roots and nature. According to Arendt, violence is not 'bestial': it is rooted precisely in *human* emotions such as rage or indignation (as a reaction to a suffering that shocks one's sense of justice or as a reaction to hypocrisy). However, even less does this emotional character make violence 'irrational': opposite to 'emotional', we do not find 'rational' but rather the inability to be moved (and thus also the inability to understand), or sentimentality as a perversion of the feelings. Rage and violence are precisely irrational when they, in accordance with the recommendation of ethologists to occasionally let off steam and thus to avoid the accumulation of the endogenous aggression instinct, aim at substitutes in place of the factors themselves that call up the rage. Moreover, sometimes violent action, precisely because of its immediacy and speed, is the only fitting (reasonable) answer, or the only means to rebalance the scales of justice once more (see Arendt 1972, 160-163).[17]

Arendt concludes that violence is a tempting but thoroughly poor substitute for action. Tempting, because violence in its manner is capable of bringing about a break in the continuous chronological process of history. It can be worthwhile, be it primarily for short-term goals, and much less for long-term structural changes: it is, in other words, rather a

reformist than a revolutionary weapon (see Arendt 1972, 176). All of this makes violence, however, no less poor as a substitute for action. On the one hand, it is not true action, but a perversion of it, because it does not speak and it does not consider the consequences (see 1972, 161); or more precisely: it is 'unrealistic' in all of its 'rational' calculations of the consequences because it does not take into account (and as a rational calculation, it *can* take no account) of the unexpected, while the latter, the 'wholly improbable,' precisely takes place in the domain of human affairs (1958, 300). On the other hand, violence does not escape those very 'tiresome' characteristics of action that it wants to eliminate: first, in some manner violent action is 'infected' by the *unpredictability* that is typical of action as such, and, accordingly, it is entirely not the trustworthy means it purports to be: "nowhere does Fortuna, good or ill luck, play a more fateful role in human affairs than on the battlefield" (1972, 106-107); second, violent action does not escape the *irreversibility* of the process that each action sets in motion, and will often end up in an endless spiral of violence: "The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (1972, 177). Intended as an instrumental intervention, related to *fabrication* and demanding the same mastery, violence always threatens to fall prey to the already mentioned reversal of relation between means and end. Violent action cannot completely cure either of these two 'evils,' unpredictability and irreversibility, which are inherent in every action.[18]

Concluding remarks

In the above analysis, the accent fell on the priority of power over violence. But one should not conclude from this that Arendt simply refuses violence. First, she recognizes "that it is particularly tempting … to equate power with violence, in a discussion of what actually is only one of power's special cases – namely, the power of government," and indeed

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" (1972, 146, my emphasis). I will immediately return to this. Second, I have already indicated that Arendt recognizes that violence is the only fitting answer in certain situations. That applies especially in the face of totalitarian evil – the concentration and extermination camps from our recent history – for which Arendt indeed uses the Biblical word *skandala* (Luke 17, 1), or Kant's expression *radical evil*. This evil is beyond measure and incomprehensible:

> All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offences and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance (1958, 241).

What the reader threatens to overlook is that the impossibility of punishment or forgiveness only manifests itself *after* the radical evil has been overcome, or at least contained. (The Nuremberg trials could only occur after the German surrender.) Prior to that moment, the power-destroying character of *skandala* already manifests itself in another manner – which Arendt mentions only in *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, albeit merely indirectly:

> That we can confront evil *only with violence* does not mean that whoever suffers evil and struggles against it, now also becomes evil, but it certainly means that evil destroys the *interpersonal human sphere* wherever it appears. Evil deeds are literally non-deeds: they make all further activity impossible... [*Dass wir dem Bösen* nur mit Gewalt *begegnen können, besagt nicht, dass wer Böses erduldet und sich wehrt, nun auch böse wird, aber es heisst wohl, dass das Böse den* zwischenmenschlichen Machtbereich *zerstört, wo immer es in Erscheinung tritt. Böse Taten sind buchstäblich Un-taten; sie machen alles weitere Tun unmöglich*...] (1981, 236, my emphasis).

"All further activity [*alles weitere Tun*]": by this Arendt once more means forgiveness, because just as in *The Human Condition*, immediately follows

the pronouncement of Jesus (Luke 17, 2) on the perpetrator of such non-deeds: "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast in the sea" (1958, 241; 1981, 236). What she does not do is connect her thought to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she holds that "total domination is the only form of government with which coexistence is not possible" (1973, XXVII), and in which she repetitively denounces the naïve diplomacy and appeasement policy of the non-totalitarian world in the face of Hitler and Stalin (1973, e.g. 393). More clearly than in *The Human Condition* and in *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, it appears here that Arendt is thoroughly of the opinion that, confronted with the danger of destruction of the in-between of power, only a resolute reaction is proper – a reaction that does not avoid the threat of violence and, if necessary, also the effective use of such. Precisely because radical evil "dispossesses us of all power" (1958, 241) we can do nothing else than answering it with violence. Thus at such a moment, one must be prepared *to fight*.

These findings bring me to my first conclusion: Arendt in fact assumes that power *needs* violence at certain moments to maintain itself. That implies that power must also prepare itself for such moments and thus must have means of violence in reserve. This dependence on violence can probably be interpreted as an additional sign of the non-omnipotent character of power, of its intrinsic finitude and limitedness. But it certainly nuances Arendt's proposition concerning the priority of power: namely, this priority is not absolute.

The temptation is now large to immediately formulate a second conclusion: namely, that Arendt in fact employs two different concepts of violence: on the one hand, a violence that comes to the assistance of power, or, to use the words that I have cited above, violence as "a last resort to keep the power structure intact," and, on the other hand, a violence that is its own goal (and thus disavows its character as a means) and places itself in the place of power, and therefore destroys all power (even of those who use it). One could add here that the first violence

can be justified in certain cases – without being legitimized – and the second in principle never (and consider this as the reason why normal everyday language usually labels the second violence as 'senseless,' i.e., without direction, resulting in nothing). This assumption that Arendt employs a distinction between a 'good' and a 'bad' violence may, at first sight, seem defensible, but in the end seems to me to be contrary to the undercurrent of Arendt's analysis. Because even if one could correctly argue that, since Arendt does not simply refuse violence, she *must* indeed make this distinction, one may not forget that she repetitively points out the immense problem confronting *every* violent act, even the so-called 'good' ones: how to maintain the priority of power over violence, or how to prevent an initially justified violence from yet degenerating into an *unforgivable* evil? (Were the fire-bombing of Dresden and the atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki actually necessary to force the respective surrender of Germany and Japan? Why indeed these atrocities, and not the destruction of the railroad tracks to the extermination camps?) To believe that we can completely control this reversal is an illusion, and for two reasons: first; one then denies the dynamic proper to violent actions (instrumental and purposeful, but simultaneously infected with unpredictability and irreversibility); second, one then underestimates the destructive and suicidal character of the modern arsenal (see 1972, 105, 112, and 116).

The second conclusion that emerges is thus different than the one just suggested: namely, that power always plays with fire and endangers itself when it appeals to violence, and thus must employ it with the utmost caution. In combination with the first conclusion (power needs violence in certain cases), the final conclusion must be: violence can and may play a role in politics only in the last resort. For that matter, Arendt's oeuvre is a plea, before it comes to this point, to counteract with might and main the erosion of power, the public space, and the common world – because this erosion forms the first and most important breeding ground of violence.

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