

Violence According to Hannah Arendt

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Abstract:

Hannah Arendt's approach to violence is a distinct approach because she introduced the semantic field of violence. She sees the concept of violence, ability, influence, or force as often being mixed with other concepts such as power. These are concepts that political science is unable to clearly distinguish between. The greatest thinkers, in his opinion, used the concepts of power and influence. And ability arbitrarily, even though these concepts refer to phenomena because the correct use of these words is not only a linguistic issue, but every term has its connotations and dimensions, and here Arendt refuses to play the game of definitions, and therefore such concepts remain power, influence, ability, or Force, etc., are merely tools of domination that humans use in order to dominate humans. What distinguishes violence from similar concepts is its instrumental nature.

Arendt also linked the concept of violence based on her use of the concept of radical evil, or what she calls the banality of evil, inspired by the Eichmann trial. She sees the loss of thinking resulting in the most horrific disasters. She sees the inability to think confirms the ability to absolute evil, and this is what translates the war that Israel is waging against Palestinians now.

Keywords: violence, evil, totalitarian power, terrorism, loss of the ability to differentiate, the Eichmann Court.

Introduction

Before delving into Arendt's concept of violence, let's define it: linguistically, "violence" (الْعُورَة) is a term used to describe force or coercion against tenderness¹. As for terminology, "violence" refers to any directed behavior aimed at harming

¹ Al-Hanafi Abdel Moneim, The Comprehensive Dictionary of Philosophical Terms, Madbouly Library, Egypt, 2000, p. 155

individuals, either through speech, harmful acts, or destructive deeds carried out by individuals or groups against others who do not desire it and attempt to avoid it. Thus, any action synonymous with force, intensity, or cruelty contradicts the nature of things and is imposed externally, implying an act of violence². Additionally, the use of control or force in an unauthorized or unlawful manner, capable of influencing someone's will, is also considered violence³. Based on this, violence can be defined as behavior that causes harm from one person to another, ranging from verbal assaults or threats to physical actions such as severe beating, rape, burning, killing, etc., resulting in physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering. Therefore, violence is undesirable, instilling fear and panic due to its consequences.

So, what is the concept of violence according to Hannah Arendt?

Arendt's book on violence, written amidst a chaotic and war-torn world, acknowledges that no one today has an answer to how we can extricate ourselves from the total absurdity of such a situation. She alerts us that questioning the nature of violence belongs to the realm of the unexpected. There is a need to distinguish between questions belonging to the field of the possible, those of the impossible, and those of the unexpected horizon.

Arendt sought to deeply understand violence, firstly from her own experiences where she encountered various forms of violence firsthand, directly engaging with its methods and legitimacy. Secondly, she drew from historical experiences of violence, revolutions, and the intellectual and societal output related to it.

The political outcome highlighted its focus on this concept by addressing its density of use by social institutions as a necessary tool to achieve demands that derive not only from legality but also from necessity. The negative trajectory of states is determined through it, where many reasons intersect for its use, which not only legitimizes violence but also motivates its use by its revered. This, in turn, removes

² Jamil Saliba, *The Philosophical Dictionary*, (MS, S), p. 112

³ Zaki Badawi Ahmed, *Dictionary of Social Sciences Terms*, Lebanon Library, Beirut, Lebanon, 1986, p. 205.

societies from their political field, as violence itself becomes a non-political means that silences voices and actions and opposes authority.

When violence is exercised with provocation only in cases of self-defense, it becomes rational, but the opposite lies when the mind contributes to its practice, making it more dangerous and irrational because the mind is a property of an entity primarily subject to the dominance of its instincts. A prime example of this is the manufacture of deadly weapons, which is an intensely rational activity under the pretext of its original function as a preserver of life, which has become an argument without meaning⁴.

We do what is possible to adapt to reality and demand the impossible to change the world, but we have nothing to expect from the unexpected except to be amazed or terrified by it.

Arendt emphasizes the element of the unexpected that we encounter when we approach the field of violence, and because war is always looming before us, its appearance is not the result of a buried desire for killing inherent in human nature, nor is it due to an aggressive instinct that we cannot suppress. Therefore, in her opinion: What is the origin of violence if it is not rooted in human nature, as the traditional political conception from Aristotle to Hobbes suggests?

Arendt wrote about love before considering politics as a field for the production of violence, and she admired what was produced by the former before delving into the latter. Therefore, Arendt thought in a mixed blend containing contradictions. She was influenced by Hegel's ideas through both Heidegger and Husserl and read Thomas Aquinas from the perspective of Jasper. She drew most of her political interests from her admiration of her daughter "Rosa Luxembourg."

Therefore, we are facing a complex thought. Anyone who knows the relationship and stance of Hegel with Karl Jasper and Arendt's relationship with them can discern the

⁴ "Hannah Arendt, On Violence," p. 54: The concept of violence belongs to the family of concepts that evoke horror, including war, death, crime, terrorism, assassination, rape, burning, hanging, suppression, domination, plunder, tyranny, injustice, poverty... et Introduction to Rosa Luxembourg

impact of this composition, which does not stop at its references but rather transitions to her positions. Arendt criticized the tormentors on Earth and criticized, on her way, the writer of the introduction along with Georges Sorel, who said, "The problems of violence remain highly mysterious,"⁵ considering it the greatest scene of violence.

Arendt did not care about violence except within the scope of her interest in politics. She did not engage in politics or think about it except based on the pain, exclusion, expulsion, and exile she experienced. Arendt did not care about any kind of political science because her past of oppression only opened her eyes to totalitarianism, lies, and violence. Therefore, her interest in violence became ordinary and natural when we trace the trajectory of her cognitive and socio-political formation filled with all shades of violence and its purposes. Violence, as a conflict she experienced once as an unwanted Jew, and another time as a student living in disputes and criticisms from her teachers, and ultimately as a fighter trying to build a nation to put an end to the Jews' loss in the world.

Arendt was not the only philosopher who looked at and thought about violence because violence, as a phenomenon and concept, was preceded by a group of prominent philosophers and activists such as Sartre, Sorel, Fanon, and Lenin. However, Arendt's ideas about violence were not actually in line with the same values and ideas as those of these thinkers about violence. She strongly disapproved and condemned violence, akin to some thinkers and theorists like Engels and Clausewitz, who considered violence an ancient human phenomenon that dates back to the dawn of mankind. Arendt, echoing Lenin, repeated that violence is a contemporary phenomenon, one of the most important contemporary phenomena of the twentieth century, as it was a century of wars and revolutions primarily. Another characteristic that Arendt tries to add to the attribute of violence is that it is the weapon of the weak. Arendt clarifies the concept of violence by citing some situations that have advocated for violence or justified it as a solution to all kinds of

⁵ Arendt Hanna, *Violence*, published by Ibrahim Al-Aris, Dar Al-Saqi, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 1992, p. 31.

conflicts that humans may encounter, as colonialism will not be described except by violence.

As with Sartre, where a man dies for another to live free, and racism will not end except by force, and equality will not know a path other than violence, and just as violence is a means in the hands of the oppressed in Arendt's examples, it is more effective in the hands of the dominant⁶

The study of the problem of violence in Arendt follows two paths:

First: The meaning of violence for her, or how Arendt represents the activity called violence.

Second: Arendt's political thought, because violence, as she says, is inseparable from politics. She sees "every politics as a struggle for power, and violence is the extreme of power."⁷ The state, like political assemblies that preceded it historically, lies in the relationship of domination of man over man built on the legitimate use of violence.

Hannah Arendt's approach to violence is a distinctive approach because she has introduced the semantic field of violence. She sees the concept of violence and authority (AUTORITE), force (FORCE), or power (POUVOIR) as concepts often confused with other concepts like authority. These are concepts that political science struggles to distinguish clearly. Even the greatest thinkers, Arendt says about PUISSANCE, use the concepts of authority, influence, and power arbitrarily, although these concepts point to different phenomena of ENTREVES. Because the proper use of these words is not just a linguistic matter, but each term has its own meanings and dimensions, Arendt refuses to engage in the game of definitions. For here, it concerns the historical conception of the concept, and here the matter boils down to linguistic neglect. Beyond this apparent ambiguity, a specific belief emerges, and the political problem lies fundamentally in just knowing the indicators of who dominates and who is dominated. Hence, such concepts as power, authority,

⁶ Arendt Hanna, *Violence*, published by Ibrahim Al-Aris, Dar Al-Saqi, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition, 1992, p. 31.

⁷ Arendt Hannah, *From Lies to Violence*, Translated by Guy Durand, Pocket 2007, P 105.

influence, or strength... etc., remain tools of domination used by humans to dominate others. What distinguishes violence from similar concepts is its PUISSANCE instrumental nature⁸.

Although Arendt initially connects political power in contemporary society with violence, she reveals it to us after discovering it herself in the conditions of contemporary man. The public sphere has only emerged as a product of the culture of speech, unlike the private sphere, whose emergence is associated with the civilization of action. This means that politics and political power, in general, are considered manifestations of the public sphere. If the public sphere itself did not exist, it would only be connected to action through speech, i.e., through dialogue and discussion. Therefore, Arendt considered the private sphere to be the family or specifically the household as a normative phenomenon⁹

The public sphere differs from the private sphere in that it provides a field for freedom and equality, as politics and the city are initially concepts created from the principle of necessity. People live together under the banner of non-violence, not the opposite; they submit to the force of life that necessitates social interaction for the survival of the individual and the species.

The experience of domination was found by Hannah Arendt in the private sphere before the public sphere. Therefore, Arendt says that Plato and Aristotle's search for the experience of domination in the political world became difficult, even impossible, due to the absence of a model in this field that combines the characteristics of the dictator or the despot. This prompted her to search for a model of despotism within the family through family relationships, as the head of the family governs as a tyrant with unlimited power over his family members and the slaves in his household¹⁰

The public sphere was, at the moment of its birth, a realm of freedom more than a realm of violence and power. It embraced all forms of equality that were absent in the private sphere, where individuals found their freedom only outside this sphere. The

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, (S, S), p. 38

⁹ Public sphere: In Greece, it means the city, and at that time Athens. Arendt Hannah, *Les Condition de L'homme Moderne*, Pocket 2008, PP 68-70. 10

¹⁰ Arendt Hannah, *Crise de la culture*, Pocket, 2007, P139.

public sphere was a space for individuality and its defense, as well as a space for thought and reflection. Hence, we find that Plato did not seek at the head of his republic a cunning ruler like Machiavelli did, nor a tyrannical ruler who governs by sword and army. Instead, he sought at the summit of his republic a philosopher-king, who makes reason a leader in the political sphere and exercises coercion in its name. Submission in the Republic of the Philosopher-King does not and will not require means of violence to achieve it, because it will establish between the king and his subjects a relationship dominated by respect.

Arendt sees politics as difficult to define ontologically because it is not inherent in human nature as Aristotle thought, but rather manifests in the relationships between people as previously mentioned. Therefore, politics, being a system of relationships, evolves with the differences and distinctions among humans. Through law, humans are equal despite their differences, and any absence of difference and distinction inevitably leads to the impoverishment of politics and its decline¹¹

Arendt does not see violence when analyzing totalitarian systems, arguing that violence fundamentally contradicts politics and completely excludes it because it is associated with non-political actions at its core, such as analysis and control or social coercion and ideological intimidation. She goes on to say in her book, 'Power and violence are contradictory because when one rules absolutely, the other is absent, and violence appears when power is threatened¹² However, if left alone, it will end with the disappearance of power.' It represents only one of the paths that power takes, and when it does, it tries to justify it, and the truth does not need justification. As for violence, it often requires justification. Arendt says in this context: 'Violence cannot descend from its opposite, which is power, and in order for us to understand violence in its reality, we must examine its roots and nature.'¹³ In this context, Arendt distinguishes between power and terrorism. Power is a collective ability stemming from collective will to coexist under civil laws and remains present as long as the

¹¹ "Arendt Hannah, What's the matter with La Politique, Seuil, Paris, 1995, p 31.

¹² Hannah Arendt, On Violence, (pp. x), p. 40

¹³ Ibid., p. 51

community remains intact, but collapses whenever the community disintegrates into conflicting factions. When the collective ability to exist together is defeated, violence triumphs and power collapses. As for terrorism, Arendt defines it as follows: "Terrorism is not violence; it is rather the form of government that assumes power when violence, after destroying all authority that refused to relinquish its position, becomes effective. The effectiveness of terrorism is entirely related to the degree of social disintegration¹⁴.

Arendt's analysis of the phenomenon of violence falls within the realm of political anthropology, which is based on critiquing the totalitarian state built on terror against its citizens (as exemplified by Stalin). Arendt distinguishes between tyranny based on violence and the totalitarian state based on total terror. She argues that the crucial difference between totalitarian domination based on terror and tyranny or dictatorship based on violence lies in the fact that the former not only stands against its enemies but also against its friends and supporters. It lives in fear of all authority, including the authority of its own friends themselves. The peak of terror is reached when the police state begins to devour its own children, turning yesterday's executioners into today's victims, and that is also the moment when power completely disappears.

Every decay that afflicts authority is an open invitation to violence, and every act of violence by the ruler or the ruled may lead to the substitution of terrorism or chaos for civil society.

In line with the phenomenological approach, Arendt sees violence often expressing feelings not necessarily related to politics, such as the fear of death and annihilation and the search for immortality through the continuity of the group. Anti-authority violence appears in the absence of freedom, as freedom means the ability to act or influence. Arendt says, "Violence is not enough to describe the phenomenon of revolution, but change is the more appropriate description. We can only talk about revolution when change occurs, meaning a new beginning, or when violence is used

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49

to form a different form of government to create a new political entity, or when liberation from oppression aims to create freedom¹⁵

Arendt considers that political violence affects two stages: firstly, it breaks the space that can be created between a group of different humans, and when this space is broken, the second stage begins the exclusion of the other from this space. Violence as a practice against the Palestinians, such as the destruction of the Kafr Qasim (KAUWA-AUWA) pillar, thwarted and shattered the possibility of launching a political world in Palestine.

In Arendt's opinion, the establishment of the Israeli state is a political failure for two main reasons:

1- Ignoring the political existence of the Palestinians who share the land with them. Arendt argues, through her famous research "The Origins of Totalitarianism," that Jews have always ignored the world's reality, leading to a lack of political awareness and becoming destructive¹⁶ She sees a similarity between the Israeli state project and the Nazi German project in that they both consider the people not as a political organization but as biological entities¹⁷. Arendt views the Jewish project in Palestine as a failed suicidal project, as it created widespread hatred towards them, suggesting a federal state as a peaceful solution bringing together both Arab and Jewish people in the region. This moderate stance has garnered her criticism, especially among Jews, for her criticism of Jewish identity and the establishment of Israel on Palestinian land, as well as her defense of Eichmann.

2- Arendt linked the concept of violence to her use of the concept of radical evil or what she calls the banality of evil inspired by the trial of Eichmann. She sees that the loss of thought leads to the worst disasters as she believes that the inability to think confirms the ability to do evil. What struck her about Eichmann is his terrifying ability to lack thought

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On the Revolution*, see: Atta Abdel Wahhab, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Lebanon, 2008, p. 47.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, op. cit, p 206

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Re-examination of Slonism*, op.cit, p124.

Eichmann didn't think, meaning he didn't think about what he was doing. Here, thought is linked to the ability to form awareness and make sound judgments. The problem with Eichmann is not that he was a Nazi but that he lacked the ability to make distinctions between what should be done and what should not, between the good hidden behind evil and the evil hidden behind good. Arendt emphasizes the idea that "the loss of distinction" is itself susceptible to totalitarian systems. The ideal element of totalitarian rule is not the charismatic Nazi or the committed Communist, but the person who no longer distinguishes between reality and imagination and between right and wrong.

A person who lacks the ability to distinguish between reality and imagination becomes an ideal element for totalitarian systems. Such a person is not necessarily stupid or lacking in education; on the contrary, they may be educated but their facts are empty, having lost their connection to reality. Arendt sees Eichmann as lacking the ability to think about what he was doing. She says Eichmann is ordinary: "ordinary because he does not represent any exception in the Nazi system."¹⁸ Eichmann did not know Hitler personally and was unaware of Nazi goals. When offered membership in the SS, he didn't object; his joining was out of necessity, a need to improve his standard of living. He had no intention of defending Hitler's racial ideas, harbored no anti-Semitic feelings, had no ideological background, not even party affiliation. Arendt calls Eichmann a "desk murderer," an administrative employee turned into a system's killing machine, applying the most murderous orders with coldness under the slogan of "duty obedience." Arendt says: "The problem with Eichmann is the presence of many like him." They, like him, were not affected by deviance or anti-Semitism; they were and still are terrifyingly ordinary and hidden individuals.¹⁹ Eichmann is a model of a citizen devoid of awareness and conscience, a model of personalities susceptible to obedience. Here, Eichmann stated during the trial and in the face of the terrible crimes he committed against Jews (crimes against Jews, crimes against humanity, and crimes during the Nazi regime): 'I did my duty

¹⁸ Ibid , 33

¹⁹ Ibid , p33

like any citizen.' Therefore, the ability to distinguish is what made Eichmann a criminal and practitioner of violence in all its forms."

Conclusion

Hannah Arendt's approach to violence is unique as she delves into its semantic field, distinguishing it from concepts like power and authority often conflated in political discourse. She views these as tools for domination rather than mere linguistic constructs, emphasizing violence's instrumental nature. Arendt links violence to a lack of fundamental thought, as seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She advocates for moderation and reason, as reflected in her work "The Origins of Totalitarianism." Arendt warns against limiting violence to physical force, highlighting its impact on politics, freedom, and human cognition. She extends the discussion beyond politics, addressing violence within familial relationships, where dominance can prevail. Arendt suggests that violence can be ideological, driven by notions of superiority or totalitarianism.

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