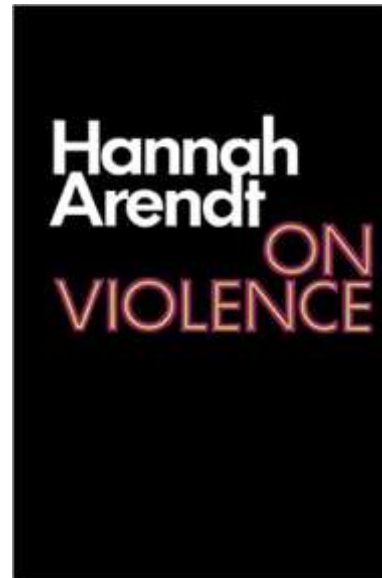


“Power versus Violence”

A 5 star Review by Dick Burkhardt of

“On Violence”

By Hannah Arendt (1969)



This classic work, which grew out of the Cold War, continues to have lessons for today. A central theme is the counterintuitive relationship between power and violence. Mao’s claim that “all power comes out of the barrel of a gun”, Arendt says, is dead wrong. Reality is that power comes from the committed and coherent action of the many, against which, the violence of the few is impotent. The US defeat in Vietnam was a classic example, as is its corresponding defeat today in Afghanistan. Violence, she says, can be effective only as an immediate, short term action in support of a far larger power or worthy cause.

A key underlying reason is that “the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies... Since the end of human action ... can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals” (p 4). Warfare as a means could easily become obsolete except that “no substitute for this final arbiter in international affairs has yet appeared on the scene” (p 5). Instead the arms race (between major powers) or counterinsurgency (major against minor powers) continues, based on variety of hypothetical scenarios until the public will to bear the costs is exhausted. But these speculative scenarios, “because of their inner consistency, have a hypnotic effect” (p 8).

While revolutions truly do depend upon “the power of the people”, they cannot be instigated by violent acts alone but have been “always and everywhere the necessary result of circumstances entirely independent of the will and guidance of particular parties and whole classes” (p 12). Technological and economic change has become a key, but unpredictable, factor in those circumstances. Arendt finds the modern notion of “progress” to be more productive than all notions of revolution, but it too falls short in face of very rapid changes.

Speaking of the black power movement of the late 60s, Arendt notes that “Black violence can be understood in analogy to labor violence a generation ago” (p 19). She notes that the one positive slogan of the 60s youth movement was the demand for “participatory democracy” but that not much came out of that, nor of their strong moral stance. “What the modern rebels have lacked” is the “down-to-earth interests of the working class and to identify with it” (p 24).

Delving more deeply into the psychology of power, Arendt notes that “the instinct of submission, an ardent desire to obey and be ruled by some strong man, is at least as prominent in psychology as the will to power, and, politically, perhaps, more relevant” (p 39). In fact, the two are interconnected, as we see today with Trumpism and in certain evangelical churches, where “God” substitutes for the “strong man” or “alpha male”. Flipping this dynamic, Arendt notes that “a strong disinclination to obey is often accompanied by an equally strong disinclination to dominate and command” (p 40), something that I recognize in myself and other classical liberals when it comes to certain revolutionary ideologies and other unreasonable demands.

Switching to more representative governments, Arendt observes that “all political institutions are manifestations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them”. As the authority of the ruling class declines, it may be replaced by a strong man and violence may ensue: “tyranny, as Montesquieu is discovered, is therefore the most violent and least powerful of forms of government” (p 41). Or, “power always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence ... relies on implements”. In fact, “the extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All” (p 42).

Delving more deeply into revolutions, Arendt notes that “where power has disintegrated, revolutions are possible but not necessary...Disintegration often become manifest only in direct confrontation” (p 49) and an organized group must be prepared to seize power. Legitimacy (divine right of Kings, electoral status, etc) is portrayed as symbolic of power but is not the basis of it. It is an “appeal to past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future” (p 52). “Violence may destroy power” when it destroys legitimacy or popular support. That is, “to substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high: for it is paid not only by the vanquished, it is also by the victor in terms of his own power” (p 53).

Totalitarian terror, such as Stalinism, is very revealing of the dynamics of power: “Every kind of organized opposition must disappear before the full force of terror can be let loose”. And in this case, the regime “turns not only against its enemies but against its friends and supporters as well, being afraid of all power” (p 55). Or, “Power and violence are opposites; where one rules absolutely, the other is absent...to speak of nonviolent power is actually redundant” (p 56).

Moving on another power dynamic, Arendt examines the black power movement of the late 60s and liberal support for it. “Racism, white or black, is fraught with violence by definition because it objects to natural organic facts which no persuasion or power could change” (p 76). She says that when white liberals declare that “we are all guilty” and confess their sins, they are actually attempting to absolve themselves without doing anything. That is, “where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits. ... it serves quite effectively to give the very real grievances ... of the Negro population an outlet into irrationality [‘black rage’]” instead of constructive action.

In fact, historically, according to Arendt, it is the hypocrisy that cause more rage than injustice. Another unproductive outlet may be witch hunts. And “since violence always needs justification, an escalation of violence in the streets may bring about a truly racist ideology to justify it” (p 77). She was thinking of the ideology promoted by black power activists in the late 1960s, but it could also apply to the “whiteness studies” of Critical Race Theory today.

Finally, Arendt says that “Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances. ...it is more the weapon of reform than revolution” (p 79). “However only if such reforms can be made with comparative ease” will violence be effective in its long-term goals. “The danger of violence ... will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If the goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic.” (p 81).

And as to power, “the monopolization of power causes the drying up or oozing away of all authentic power sources in the country” (p 82). This monopolization may be by an unaccountable bureaucracy or party machine, not just an oligarchy. Its defeat will not come from violence but from intolerable conditions, leading to mobilization of the people.

- Dick Burkhardt