Hannah Arendt's Theory of Nonviolence

“J'avais rêvé d'une république que tout le monde eût adorée. Je n’ai pu croire que les hommes fussent si féroces et si injustes.”

Camille Desmoulins ([1794], 2004, x)

Hannah Arendt was one of the most prominent political theorists of the second half of the 20th century, whose work continues to exert a strong influence (on the academia and beyond) to this day. In this paper I shall attempt to identify and critically examine a distinct theory or philosophy of nonviolence in Hannah Arendt's work. The article will focus on discerning various contradictions and moments of banality which limit the validity and relevance of her contribution to this field, especially in terms of the failure to fully appreciate the significance of class structure and class conflict, and the specific reverberations this has had on her theory of nonviolence. This theory of nonviolence will be examined with regard to two basic outlooks (that I shall mention presently) which she partly attempted to integrate into a single theoretical thread, particularly through her theory of power and her general rejection of the instrumentalist political logic.

From the general perspective I have just outlined, I firstly analyse the connection between her theory of nonviolence and her theory of the democratic social order based on public freedom. This includes her concept of free associations or what might be termed associative democracy, as well as deliberative democracy viewed through this prism of nonviolence, her approach to the structural factor in the functioning of social orders, etc. The second interconnected theme I wish to explore is the role of nonviolence in her theory of democratic social change, particularly in relation to the question of the viability and applicability of her theories of power and political consent. Finally, I shall try to establish whether and how these two basic perspectives consociate together in her thought, and what basic problems might be posed for the theory of nonviolence with regard to their pairing. In particular, I shall explore how Arendt’s rejection of political instrumentalism and of violence interacts with the project of radical democratic social change.

1 “My dream was a republic that the whole world would adore. I couldn’t believe that people could be so savage and so unjust.”
Introductory Notes

Arendt, who supported the death penalty for Eichmann for instance (Arendt, 1963), was largely an advocate of pragmatic nonviolence (of a non-absolute kind), and her politics did not possess that “Gandhian” quality of radical compassion. Her political philosophy fundamentally stands in the rationalist tradition which renounces the use of emotions, or at least seeks to transform and rationalise them. For example, the American Revolution (which she herself portrayed as “the only revolution in which compassion played no role in the motivation of the actors” – Arendt, 2006, 61) is portrayed as superior by Arendt largely because it is supposedly “independent” from emotional motives. Indeed, she seeks to “rescue” the rationalist core even in the act of forgiveness, a human faculty often dismissed as a “sentimentalist” or religious “prejudice”: forgiveness is valuable because it serves as a social corrective, for it keeps human destructive and self-destructive impulses in check. Love is substituted here for what she considers its political counterparts, solidarity and respect, “a kind of “friendship” without intimacy and without closeness” (Arendt, 1998, 243). Forgiveness and redemption are critically important for reaffirming the role of the subjective element, for maintaining rational control over political processes and countering the prospects for violent reactivity and destructiveness (ibid., 243). In other words, Arendt focuses on nonviolence and nonviolent action as a specific manner of exerting power or, indeed, as a source of power.

Arendt's Theory of Power

Max Weber perceived power quite straightforwardly, essentially in terms of influence on the behavior of others (see Presbey, 1993). For Arendt, on the other hand, power is a social category. All power (as opposed to individual strength) is consensual simply by virtue of being social, by being based on the cooperation of the population (Habermas, 1986). The participants of the social contract acquire power precisely through their commitment to mutual cooperation. Arendt’s pluralist political ethics primarily rest on the notion that benevolent or tolerant group interaction ensures greater and more sustainable power formations than those subjected to domineering and violent internal relationships.

Power is “communicatively produced” (ibid., 78). Communicative action is the medium for intersubjectivity, through
which individual and group realities are constructed (ibid.). The contingent nature of power rests on the need for some form of popular participation in power (however passive this participation is): “All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them” (Arendt, 1970, 41). Arendt talks of Danish unarmed resistance to the Nazis as an example of “the enormous power potential inherent in nonviolent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence” (Arendt, 1963, 154). Indeed, it could be argued that organised mass nonviolent resistance is the central social invention of the twentieth century, even if its potential is yet to be fully revealed to us.

The ruling elite’s control rests not “on superior means of coercion as such, but on a superior organization of power” (Arendt, 1970, 50). Arendt posited that “to equate political power with ‘the organization of violence’ makes sense only if one follows Marx’s estimate of the state as an instrument of oppression in the hands of the ruling class” (Arendt, 1986, 59). In fact, I would argue, to the extent that violence is an instrument of power (rather than power itself), to the extent that coercion directly and indirectly leads to consent (either consciously or through semi- or subconscious forms of resolving “cognitive dissonance”), it can also be stated that (even in semi-open societies) coercion is indeed capable of creating power, although often of a less sustainable nature. It would be analytically (not to mention strategically) unhelpful to underestimate the role of coercion in consciousness formation and the perpetuation of consent in modern “democratic” capitalist societies. Violence can, under certain circumstances, also increase a group’s power through strategic positioning toward resources and the (broadly conceived) means of production, distribution and exchange. In any case, there are limitations to the power of “soul force”, and an abstract mind-matter dualism is unhelpful. Still, the contingency of power preserves the possibility of freedom. Power is a set of relationships which cannot be permanently acquired, but have to be constantly reproduced and renovated (Presbey, 1993). According to Arendt, violence cannot on its own secure long-term consent.

The Arendtian concept of nonviolence bases itself on the power of social and economic non-cooperation (Swomley, 1972): “It is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country", both in autocratic and in more pluralist regimes (Arendt, 1970, 41). Indeed, as the experience of Eastern Europe under Stalinist “communism”
indicated, overtly authoritarian systems of government might even be more vulnerable to the power of public opinion than modern “democratic” regimes, which possess stronger instruments of manipulation, accommodation and containment.

Structural Violence

“The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets and to steal bread.”

Anatole France (1894)

Assessing Arendt’s theory of power, Habermas pointed out that “she removes politics from its relations to the economic and social environment”, and that “she is unable to grasp structural violence” (Habermas, 1986, 84). Her approach implies a fundamental difference in the meaning of “covert”/structural and overt violence. From an alternative viewpoint, one of the main insights of Marxian analysis is that capitalism connotes a set of social relationships of domination, including often “hidden” forms of exploitation and oppression, as well as the culturally condoned and legitimised forms of open repression and oppression. Sartre was right to emphasise the reactive nature of the violence of the oppressed (on this question, see Gordon, 2001).

Analyses of power which disregard the structural elements of class power can provide only limited conceptual tools required for a coherent and dialectical theory of social change. Gene Sharp, the noted theorist of nonviolent action, identified important factors of power such as habit and tradition, “fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the ruler, zones of indifference and absence of self-confidence, and absence of self-confidence among subjects” (Sharp, 1973, 24), etc. The existence of these factors makes it easier to question Arendt’s (1970) claim that violence is only capable of destruction, but is incapable of creating power. A strong case could be made for the supposition that the Arendtian consent theory of power would need to be reconceptualised in a manner closer to Sharp's theory before it might be open to the effective application of practical political knowledge in relation to nonviolent action. Still, it is necessary to engage with the question of coercion – including unarmed coercion. To what extent and in what form can the element of coercion constitute a
positive factor in the victory over undemocratic powers, in the construction and preservation of brighter new realities?

Arendt's persistent resistance to the incorporation of certain elements of the Marxian perspective did not simply result in a certain underappreciation of the plebeian efforts and aspirations in the processes of change – it also severely restricted her ability to fully grasp the crucial class dynamic of actual historical conflict, and to include it integrally into the body of her theoretical work.

Instead, from her impoverished epistemological viewpoint, Arendt sometimes idealistically falls into the trap of searching for foundational messages in symbolism, which is often a secondary manifestation of concrete lived experience and of more significant material and cultural realities. The French Revolution, although largely bourgeois, was integral, rich in content; the American Revolution remained more clearly restricted to formal institutional transformation, confined to that limited liberal conception of “freedom from”, and therefore deprived in terms of relevant social content. This is the great contradiction in Arendt’s appreciation of the American Revolution, which appears to have offered less in terms of extra-institutional, non-formal, substantive public freedom and authentic citizen participation. The most democratic institution of the American Revolution, the committees of correspondence (rather than the famed town meetings which were an earlier, disconnected occurrence), did not quite parallel the Parisian communal councils (nor the strong, radically egalitarian social currents which helped to shape the French Revolution). Democracy, in its classical meaning as the “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, is the lived experience of popular agency, wide public participation in public affairs (encompassing political, economic and social institutions and extra-institutional fora) and the cooperative distribution of power and resources.

Public Freedom and the Democratic Order

“Political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government’, or it means nothing.“

Hannah Arendt (2006, 210)

The democratic social covenant is a source of empowerment
through which individuals can acquire public freedom (ibid.). This understanding approaches the democratic socialist concept of peaceful, free associations based on voluntary, reciprocal, participatory cooperation, i.e. on democratic self-government. This democratic order is based on constructive democratic dialogue\(^2\). On the one hand, the process of deliberation is conceived as a form of reciprocal “maieutics”, a quest for truth as opposed to the intellectually (and sometimes politically) more barren discursive phenomenon of debate. Additionally, however, debate (i.e. the conduct of political affairs “in the form of speech and without compulsion” – Arendt, 2005, 7) itself represents a democratic alternative to violent forms of conflict resolution.

Freedom, as Arendt maintains, “is participation in public affairs” (ibid., 22). In addition to invoking the participatory “archetype” of the Greek polis, Arendt finds the antecedents of this ideal in the councilist experiments of earlier revolutions, such as the American town meetings, the Parisian sociétés populaires and revolutionary sections in the French Revolution and during the Paris Commune of 1871, Russian soviets and the German Räte, as well as in the Jeffersonian plan for “elementary republics” or “counties divided into wards” (Arendt, 2005). She wrote: “The danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity, and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens” (Arendt, 2006, 256). It is for this reason that Arendt described the council system as “the best in the revolutionary tradition”, “the always defeated but only authentic outgrowth of every revolution since the eighteenth century” (Arendt, 1970, 22).

For Arendt, it was the frustration of the faculty of action, of participation and public engagement, which contributes to the development and expression of violent and destructive impulses\(^3\). Arendt’s vision is a defence of the concept of deliberative democracy, of a cooperative and inclusive polity based on pluralism where deliberation serves as a source of legitimacy and social creativity. En passant, consensus decision-making, which has often been presented as the least violent form of public deliberation, also has to be questioned from the

\(^2\)“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 violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt, 1998, 200)

\(^3\)“To expect people, who have not the slightest notion of what the res publica, the public thing, is, to behave nonviolently and argue rationally in matters of interest is neither realistic nor reasonable. (…) The greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence.” (Arendt, 1970, 78-80).
point of view of nonviolence theory (in addition to questions regarding its dialogical efficacy). Firstly, there is the problem of possible disruption of the decision-making process by a minority, the violence of minoritarian pressures and impositions. This problem is often exacerbated by the structural implications of the consensual form of decision-making. Conversely, the “tyranny of the majority” is a parallel threat, as the pressure of the presumed need and expectations that a common decision needs to be reached can lead to the suppression (and self-suppression) of dissenting views, leading to a false and forced perception of group monolithism. In both of these scenarios, soliloquies are cloaked with the garments of dialogue.

In addition to emphasising the violent effects of bureaucratised social life, Arendt also warns of a tendency of returning to tribalistic nationalisms as a reaction against the instabilities induced by modern mass societies and globalistic capitalist integrative and centralising processes, which disempower individuals and entire populations (Arendt, 1970). Pointing to the centrality of civic duty, Arendt (2006) identified the escape from freedom (in the sense of the escape from public responsibility) as one of the central problems of all attempts at constituting a society based on public freedom. Furthermore, introducing a concept similar to the Sartrean notion of “bad faith”, Arendt pointed to the fatalism of Cold War warriors (with their slogans “better dead than red” etc.), their failure to commit the existential act by choosing outside the predetermined binary militarist schema. Arendt’s reaffirmation of participatory democracy, of the power of subjectivity in history, sought to restore dialecticity at a moment marked by fatalistic definitions of history obsessed by the impression of predetermined linearity, or that of uncontrollable chaos.

The “speechless”, anti-political nature of overt violence is a particular burden on the prospects for democratic life\(^4\). In contrast, deliberation and dialogue are the wellsprings of public freedom.

**Violence or Democratic Social Change**

“No man shall show me a Commonwealth born crooked that ever became straight.“

\(^4\)“Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only laws – *les lois se taisent*, as the French Revolution phrased it – but everything and everybody must fall silent” (Arendt, 2006, 9).
James Harrington ([1656] 2006, 206)

For Arendt, revolutions are not simply phenomena of progression from the past, extreme elements of a certain linear historical itinerary – they constitute a historical break, an interruption in the order of events and stages of development, bringing forth a new beginning. The fact that revolutions have often been intellectually conceived in terms of restoration, a renovation of Roman republican antiquity or of the ancient Hellenic *polis* structure, has little bearing on this essential understanding.

The main analytical currents in the discussion of the causes of revolutions have established the centrality of material interest; they should not confine our understanding of popular motivations solely to the material set of factors. Arendt’s humanistic focus on self-actualisation also evokes modern countercultural theories and sensibilities. Even our “post-modern” time might potentially leave space for the practical explication of an Arendtian democratic project. However, in the absence of torrential economic and political crisis and of progressive counter-hegemony, this utopian vision lacks the regenerating and creative forces to approximate it in political reality.

For Arendt, the existence of human agency is an argument in favour of the possibility of nonviolence. In particular, she made a contribution to the redefinition of revolution, the foundational political act, as a phenomenon which can be conceived outside the domain of violence. According to Arendt, Marx also placed greater emphasis on the importance of systemic contradictions than on the role of violence in deep historical change (Arendt, 1970). Additionally, she claimed that “violence, contrary to what its prophets try to tell us, is more the weapon of reform than of revolution” (Arendt, 2006, 79).

The archetypal association of chaos with radical social change, or what Camille Desmoulins called “torrent révolutionnaire” (Desmoulins in Arendt, 2006), was historically reinforced by its often criminal arbitrariness: “The Reign of Terror eventually spelled the exact opposite of true liberation and true equality; it equalized because it left all inhabitants equally without the protecting mask of legal personality” (Arendt, 2006, 98). According to Arendt, the task of republican foundation is incompatible with a grave curtailment of civil rights. In her analysis, this republican project is dependent on the constitution of definite new laws and of well-ordered institutions. Arendt criticised this “revolutionary process which had become a law

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5“The experiences of the French Revolution with a people thrown into a ‘state of nature’ left no doubt that the multiplied strength of a multitude could burst forth, under the pressure of misfortune, with a violence which no institutionalized and controlled power could withstand. But these experiences also taught that, contrary to all theories, no such multiplication would ever give birth to power, that strength and violence in their pre-political state were abortive” (Arendt, 2006, 173).
 unto itself” (ibid., 175) – the turbulences of unrestrained power struggles pushed the process far outside of the boundaries of conscious (let alone rational or reasonable) subjective control. The basis of Arendt’s pro-constitutionalist argumentation lies in the understanding that strong new organs of authority, capable of modulating the dialectical relationship between permanence and change, have to be established. This is the link connecting her two differing notions of the political – the first being revolutionary politics as the politics of the historical break, while the second is conceived as a standardised, highly regulated political process once the basic framework has been cemented. She was interested in the problem of securing the necessary internal dynamic capable of maintaining popular participation and progressive social innovation. Much of her analysis in *On Revolution* is centrally concerned with the search for the “revolutionary absolute”, the bedrock or “perpetuum mobile” of democratic political life. This “revolutionary perplexity” is the question of rooting revolutionary dynamism in the very political structure of the new order.⁶

Arendt accorded the social question with that crucial destructive function in the revolutionary process, as if radical equality did not constitute the necessary precondition for positive freedom. True, there is a clear antagonising component in the demand for substantive equality, and there is often a paradoxical twist to the plebeian self-preservation, for its elemental force challenges reason and can bring existential peril precisely when it most strongly seeks to defy it. On pain of death, the revolutionary social contract must not fall into the trap of corporatism. The vengeance of the oppressed will result in their own downfall. “He who lives by the sword, shall perish by the sword”, and the ancient cycle reasserts itself. But the struggle of the *Sans-Cullotes*, in all social revolutions - if moderated by reason, wisdom and a wider civic republican project – remains the closest approximation toward ensuring participatory democratic self-determination, the destruction of domination *en general*. A progressive synthesis should be sought. Thomas Paine powerfully expressed this humanitarian democratic sentiment in his speech to the National Convention, opposing the death penalty for Louis XVI: “My language has always been that of liberty and humanity, and I know that nothing so exalts a nation as the union of these two principles, under all circumstances. (...) If, on my return to America, I should employ myself on a history of the French Revolution, I had rather record a thousand errors on the side of mercy, than be obliged to tell one act of severe justice” (Paine, [1793] 1995, 389).

Arendt’s understanding of the boundaries of “mechanical” class solidarity in particular, its tendency towards uniformity based on the lowest common ideological

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⁶ Writing on the American Senate and the Supreme Court, she stated: “The question is only whether that which made for stability and answered so well the early modern preoccupation with permanence was enough to preserve the spirit which had become manifest during the Revolution itself. Obviously this was not the case” (Arendt, 2006, 223).
and material denominator, is a useful reminder of the need for greater political sophistication in the founding of a new Republic. The struggle for legitimacy in particular is the great test of all revolutions (especially considering the pluri-centred nature of power), and it might be a critical strategic perspective for the avoidance of violence. In turn, the avoidance of violence is also crucial for the preservation and expansion of legitimacy, not solely with regard to possible allies or opponents - it is often critical for the internal cohesion, motivation and resolve of the dissenters themselves. The paralysis of normal life patterns and the concomitant physical, existential insecurity in conditions of military conflict can diminish the population’s willingness to fight. Other usual side-effects of violence such as the centralist implications of military organisation, the extractive bureaucratic economy which supports the militarist system (Martin, 2001), as well as hatred and intolerance, sexism, etc. also diminish the prospects for the sustainable construction of a peaceful and democratic society: “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world” (Arendt, 2006, 80).

The critical task for revolutionaries and reformers is to act as catalysts in the disintegration of consent for the status quo, and to initiate the creation of counter-hegemony through a new alternative worldview and organisation built on elements of both continuity and discontinuity with the locally and nationally embedded cultural heritage (or civiltá in Gramscian terms) and on a system of rebellious alliances. This bloc of progressive forces has to involve diverse social currents. Whether conceived as a vanguardist united front or a “progressive alliance” (Targ, 2007), such a strategy requires an effort to consistently cultivate respectful mutual conduct. It precludes the systematic suppression of the autonomy of these allied groups and the violent control over the will and the character of the allied participants in the process of change.

Nonetheless, although pluralism often ensures greater long-term stability and sustainability of power, it is also important to acknowledge certain benefits of a high degree of cohesion and unity on crucial issues. While the process of change often requires highly flexible compromises, the ideal of progressive social partnership is threatened when differences in “subjective” and “objective” social interests imperil the very existence of compatible solutions. Just as pluralism needed for the construction of a system of alliances poses serious problems to the necessary cohesion and coordination of the movement for change, this need for organisational cohesion and coordination raises the issue of the degree to which centralised organisation might be required, both in the movement and in the new order. It is, of course, a potential challenge to the ideal of participatory public freedom and nonviolent social relations.

Arendt (2006) pointed to the totalitarian implications of Rousseau’s “volonté générale”, evocative of “raison d’état” in its unanimity and uniformity, which was effectively introduced by the French Jacobins as a “forced cohesion” (an approach also capable of easily integrating Rousseau’s concept of internal self-policing of
“particularistic” interests). She sensibly understood this uniformity could potentially lead toward an acceptance of revolutionary terror and toward a forceful collectivist position which negates the potential for the compatibility of the public and the private, the general and the particular, leading to a “terror of virtue”. In response to this emphasis on merciless “justice”, Arendt (despite her usual distrust of emotions in politics) nobly posited that “compassion will transcend [virtue] by stating in complete and even naïve sincerity that it is easier to suffer than to see others suffer” (Arendt, 2006, 76). She noted the hypocrisy of righteousness in those grandiose ideologies which undervalue the actual experiences of individuals, threading over sentient fellow beings in their pursuit of Virtue: “Par pitié, par amour pour l’humanité, soyez inexhumaines!” (ibid., 79) She strongly depicted the tragic destructive and auto-destructive implications of political fanaticism, paranoia, policing of oneself and others. Popular mobilisation is no guarantee for progressive politics. There is, however, a clear difference between the tyranny of public opinion and the egalitarian implications of the ideal of public freedom. Arendt’s account of totalitarianism, however, often focused on advancing a rather de-contextualised theory of psychological alienation and the crises of identity of the masses, the “loneliness of crowds”, without carefully examining, or even adequately acknowledging, the objective systemic contradictions which are of fundamental importance to the rise of totalitarian formations. Arendt noticed the conservative stabilising function of post-WWI constitutionalism, pointing to the formalistic adoption of the constitutional concept which began to be used “as if a constitution was a pudding to be made by a recipe” (Arthur Young in Arendt, 2006, 135). She did not, however, openly identify and appreciate the relevance of conservative class stabilisation in the preservation of American post-revolutionary minority privileges and minority rule. In addition to structurally-supported differences in power and status, the constitution of the citizen of a certain nation-state as an entity in possession of certain inalienable rights also serves as a basis for the exclusion of non-citizens (slaves, immigrants, enemy combatants and partly prisoners, etc.). This reality subverts the supposed meaning of “universal and inalienable” human rights (provided “by virtue of birth” or of sentience alone). Arendt noted the uselessness of endearing proclamations which have not been incorporated into the body of positive law, but what is the point in using this finding (which pertains to all existing social orders) as a theoretical stick specifically against the French revolutionary tradition? This mainstream has helped to reinforce the myth of America’s positive democratic exceptionalism.

In fact, Arendt’s admiration of the pluralist component in American revolutionary thought and practice partly functions as a misplaced imposition of modern political sensibilities onto a different historical context of an anti-monarchic American national liberation struggle led by a (relatively) socio-economically homogenous national elite. Her limited definition of the realm of politics prevented her
from clearly differentiating between juxtaposed political conceptions. On the one side is the conception of a truly democratic united front which transcends corporatist illusions (with their exclusivist identifications and conclusions, including peasant and workers’ economistic particularism), yet bases itself on the political leadership and the historical claim of the oppressed and the have-nots. On the other side lies the conception of unprincipled, opportunistic class collaboration, which does not challenge the elite privileges and the undemocratic distribution of wealth and power. Naturally, these are programmatic and strategic ideal-types which cannot be applied to the same extent and in the same manner regardless of concrete circumstances.

These differing conceptions of democratic politics do not necessarily determine the resulting level of social violence. Paradoxically, however, with all its inherent brutality, it is the civil war component in radical social change, with its explicit class dynamic, which has enriched the French and European republican tradition. American national unification against foreign control, and the concomitant nationalist class collaboration, represent an important factor in the multi-causal process of US historical development which has probably contributed to the particularly strong entrenchment of imperialistic plutocracy and the erosion of egalitarian and peaceable democratic values in US society. Formal “republican” institutional oversight, very valuable as it is, nonetheless maintains its subordinate role vis-à-vis integral capitalist class power. None of this is intended to negate the importance and value of formal checks and balances, and of political pluralism – only to illustrate their limits and contradictions, which tend to remain hidden when the corrosive influence of anti-democratic privileged power is overlooked, and when social reality is approached by ignoring the concrete context of class interests and class politics. Lucidly, Arendt reminded that “only power arrests power” (Arendt, 2006, 142). But here again, her omission is at least as important as what she actually said, and she did not address the problem of the collusion of formally separate forms of political, military and corporate power around shared interests, as well as whether the separation of political institutional powers can adequately defend the population against organised structural violence of special interest organisations (the corporations, political parties, international institutions of political and economic governance, etc.) and their networks. The ideology of social partnership devoid of class analysis is a poor response to the existence of social antagonisms. The veneer of “rational impartiality” is often implied in this type of deliberative process. Arendt acknowledged the centrality of self-interest in history, but failed to elucidate the necessary political conclusions in relation to this. Privilege will not simply “self-abolish” itself, and this realisation has definite repercussions on strategies for change. Reformist strategies will certainly remain important elements of serious movements for change (sometimes in the form of “transitional demands” and “non-reformist reforms”), yet long-term power equilibriums in cases of struggle between systemic class opponents remain unrealistic. Opportunities for the re-
consolidation of the elite’s power tend to be quickly seized upon. Similarly, the self-
preservation of the political “vanguard” as an organisational force also historically
tended to become more important than the achievement of the original reformist and
revolutionary goals, which were distorted and manipulated according to the interests of
the new elites.

To summarise with regard to Arendt’s central views on nonviolent resistance,
the use of violence often leads to a loss of public legitimacy. In the longer run,
violence diminishes the power of those who use it (Arendt, 1970). Arendt (ibid.) called
this the “backlash phenomenon”, a category also known as “political jiu-jitsu” (Sharp,
1980) in the theory of nonviolent resistance. This term denotes a process in which
the use of violence backfires as it induces resentment and moral outrage, usually of third
parties, but often also of the elements belonging to the party that used violence.
However, Arendt might have overestimated the effectiveness of asymmetrical “warfare”
when she spoke of “a complete reversal in the relationship between power and
violence” (Arendt, 1970, 10). I should note in this context that the Arendtian
requirement of consent for the construction of power applies to the state machinery
and the military as well. Arendt mentioned the importance of the military's (partial)
rejection of its former functions if the revolutionary process is to have a serious chance
of succeeding (Arendt, 2006). It would have been interesting had she attempted to
develop this type of practical observations more thoroughly. Unfortunately, her
analysis of the phenomenon of consent remained on a very high level of abstraction.

The Critique of Political Instrumentalism

Good political life – i.e. participatory deliberative democracy - is an end in
itself (Habermas, 1986). Arendt challenged the instrumentalist ethos of modern
revolutions and of modern thought; she “recalled the proverb that the only way to fight
a dragon is to become a dragon oneself, and doubted whether the price was worth
paying” (Canovan, 1992, 167). She was adamant about the need to consistently oppose
alienating, instrumentalist logic, which she identified in the focus on goals in general.
Keenly aware of the phenomenon of “the idiocy of technocracy” (Arendt, 1998), her
concern with alienation largely centred on society’s perpetuation of war (in modern US
this takes place in the form of what she described as “the military-industrial-labor
complex” – Arendt, 1970), which has come to dominate over humankind and its future
prospects. According to Arendt, the uncertainty regarding the final outcome of political
struggles also leads to the primacy of means over the contingency of ends. For her,
“violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals (...). The danger of
violence, even if it moves consciously in a non-extremist framework of short-term
goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved
rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of
violence into the whole body politic” (Arendt, 1970, 79). This has been the unfortunate trajectory of many revolutions thus far. Let us put aside the paradox that she dismisses nonviolence per se (as a wide-ranging moral philosophy, an ethics), and perceives it more as a tool in the processes of constituting and perpetuating an order based on public freedom. The rejection of goal-oriented perspectives is actually misleading, since the relationship between ends and means is not one-dimensional: “Arendt fails to see that while ends, or norms, may lead us into violence, they can also restrain us from violence” (Smith, 1971, 223). The ends also shape the means, and the means are impoverished when the outcomes are forgotten. By “subsuming strategic action under instrumental action” (Habermas, 1986, 84), she neglected the importance of direction and effectiveness in political action. Her own academic identity, which partly remained reminiscent of Karl Mannheim’s (1940) ideal of the “free-floating intellectual“, was an impediment to the development of such a strategic outlook.

Concluding Thoughts

Arendt’s concept of public freedom rests on the nonviolent social covenant and on participatory deliberation, which are perceived as the basis of authentic sustainable power. Her understanding of genuine, deep change was that it was predicated on the development of democratic discursive space and of political institutions capable of providing these participative processes with an ordered historical durability. However, the categorical rejection of instrumentalist logic, with its concomitant neglect of strategic considerations, left important questions unanswered. These include the issue of the form and extent of nonviolent coercion, the problem of basing counter-hegemonic work on new, truly nonviolent structural solutions which would transcend the dominant contemporary doctrine of “social partnership”, the questions regarding the synthesis of tolerant pluralism and political cohesion, democratic participation and effective organisational coordination, etc. Nonetheless, her work provides one of the early theoretical underpinnings for an explicit concept of nonviolent change and of a nonviolent social order.

Bibliography


