Race, Power, and Terror in Hannah Arendt's thought

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Title

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt's early work focused on the relationship between political violence, race, and nation. Arendt is one of the first thinkers to have emphasized the link between imperialism and totalitarianism. As soon as the *Origins of Totalitarianism* appeared, it underscored the connection between colonial imperialism and totalitarianism. The concepts of race and bureaucracy, which are at the heart of the totalitarian process, emerge from the colonial experience. In the same way the tools of the domination of the Western peoples over the colonized peoples, were the matrix from which the totalitarian domination could be concretized. Moreover, Hannah Arendt theorizes an opposition between power, violence, and terror, based on the instrumental nature of violence, which allows her to think about the originality of totalitarian domination. The objective of this intervention is to understand Hannah's opposition theorized between violence and terror, in order to see how this opposition proves fruitful to think about the colonial phenomenon and the development of racism. This intervention will focus on the functioning of slavery societies to show how they are already based on the "iron circle" described by Arendt to designate the totalitarian terror. The challenge then is to see how the arendtian conception of violence allows us to understand the role played by race in the construction of the modern state and its persistence in contemporary society.

Key word: Arendt, Hannah (1906-1975); Political philosophy; Imperialism; Slavery

Text

I wanted to speak about the arendtian distinction between power, violence and terror. And see how these distinctions can be used to understand modern political facts.

Hannah Arendt is indeed a thinker who has tried to get back politic its own dignity. By opposition with thinkers like Max Weber who used to define power as a State monopole of legitimate physical violence, Hannah Arendt tried to understand the nature of power without taking violence into account. However, as she Understands power separately of violence, as two different concepts, she subsequently must redefine violence as an autonomous concept.

Firstly, Power is understood as the ability of being active with other men. Hannah Arendt describes power as a potentiality present each time people are gathering, speaking and acting with one another. Every power is legitimate by the only way to be an active community of men with their own rules, constitutions and dynamics.

Power is the process by which men are making things together. No matter the nature of the gathering. This can be a legal institution, a secret society, an illegal syndicate fighting for civil rights or even a knitting association working together to have access to municipal local. In all these cases, there is a community able to engage and influence public space. Moreover, the community becomes its own public space where people can speak and act with other ones. Power is the foundation of politic.

On the other hand, Hannah Arendt describes violence as a force used upon other men in order to insure a kind of domination. When one uses violence, he is never *with* other people but only *against* them.

For Hannah Arendt, violence is unpolitical, even better, it is anti-political. To use violence means to break up with the plurality of men and to establish a situation in which only strength prevails.

Violence doesn't care about other people's desire or willing. It is not a balanced relationship. Moreover, violence is not affected by number or masses. Like Arendt says, few people with machine guns can easily overcome thousands of pacific people. That's why a small military elite frequently dominates a whole disarmed population.

By opposition with power, violence is furthermore determined by its finality. When power is a process that is its own finality, violence must have a purpose. In the arendtian conception, violence never can be legitimate but can be justified by the goal to reach. Violence is a tool and can be necessary used in certain circumstances. To paraphrase Arendt, violence is as useful for its holder as crime serves a robber. Thus, a dictator can use violence to stop a demonstration, a slave can use violence to escape his master etc. etc.

That's why violence is so often used in political situation despite its unpolitical nature and that's why power, in its arendtian conception, is often confused with violence. Violence stops discussion, negotiation and compromise to instore a pure balance of power in which there is no need to deal with the other.

The problem, as Arendt says, is that if violence can easily destroy political power is unable to establish a new one. To build a new political order necessary leads to stop violence and get back to the negotiation table. In a sense, Arendt is quite close of the Clausewitzian comprehension of war. Not because Arendt would say that violence should be the continuation of policy with other means, but because she insists on the necessary limited character of violence.

Violence has to be framed by the political power that can only give it its purposes. By doing so, political space is temporarily abolished in favor of an opposition between opponents. However, the goal achievement also implies that politic takes back its rights. Conversely, the impossibility to find back a political solution means to stay locked into an endless conflict. Ludendorff's attempt to reverse Clausewitz's formula by subjecting politics to the logic of war is a misunderstanding of both nature of politic and violence. As illustrated by German successive failures in the two world wars.

So, there are two independent concepts, nevertheless connected together. From now, the concept of terror is described as a confusion of the two precedent notions.

Terror is a system in which violence is deliberately used in order to perpetuate the violence of the system. Like power, terror is distinguished by its lack of finality. The purpose of terror is only the perpetuation of itself, as a permanent state of violence. No longer limited by political issues, it extends to the whole public and social life. Having become its own principal, terror cannot simply be stopped by the victory of one side or the other but appears as a perpetual quest of real or imaginary opponents.

To illustrate the opposition between violence and terror, Hannah Arendt distinguishes the "desert of tyranny" from the "iron circle of terror". That means the violence destroys public spaces, leaving only a political vacuum characterized by powerlessness of citizen. On the other hand, terror encapsulates all the aspects of political and life in a state of permanent agitation in order to hide the lack of power.

Terror is a kind of radicalization where there is no more separation between political power and the use of violence. Terror is a dynamics of destruction the whole political and social life in a permanent movement. For Hannah Arendt, terror as a system is a characteristic of totalitarism. However, we can find other political situation, in which violence replace the dynamic of power and specially during the colonization that is presented by Arendt as an origin of totalitarism.

Hannah Arendt is indeed one of the first thinkers who analyses the link between imperialism and totalitarism. In this perspective, construction of Race as a ideologic system of domination has a major role in the construction of the totalitarian structure.

For Arendt, the construction of Race as a system of thinking and domination take place into the confrontation between white colonizer and Africa during the last part of the 19e century, and specially in south Africa. Inspiring by "Hearth of Darkness" from Conrad, she understands Race as a system of domination that become its own finality. She described Afrikaner's situation as an alienation-from-the-world in which there are no longer able to constitute a human world made of men action. They are not able to organize a new political order based on equality with black and the only way to maintain their racial domination is from now to continue to use violence without being able to stop it. Thus, colonization and race domination, are presented as the premises of a terror system

There is many to say about this interpretation, and specially about the racism of Arendt's description of Africa as savage continent. Like Katheryn T. Gines said, it looks like Arendt "presents black people as the problem rather than situating white people anti-Black racism as the problem". Moreover, Arendt underestimates the role of race during the construction of European modernity.

Following here interpretation, there is a difference between the first colonization of the 18th century where race was only a kind of prejudice without being a system of interpretation and the imperialism characterized by an endless process of colonial conquest. However, this

analysis is only working because she is focused on the metropolitan situation without take colonies into account.

Of course, Arendt talked about slavery, but she doesn't analyze structure of modern slavery society, where slave could represent around 80% of the population. The plantation system already has all the characteristics of colonial society described by Arendt as a source of totalitarianism:

The system is indeed characterized by a permanent violence, illustrated by a very high mortality with around 60% people dying during the first year of their arrived. It's not a instrumental and limited violence used to reach a goal, but a paranoiac system that is building his own opponent in order to maintain his racial domination. Colonizer are always living into the fear of a black rebellion that could instore a black kingdom and reverse the racial domination. Fear that is a pure fantasy because black people only wanted to live in peace on their own land like we can see at the end of the Suriname's rebellion.

As we can see, there is no break between a first colonization period and a real imperialist moment. The plantation is already a system of terror based on a racial domination that reject equality of power. When Race become an ideological structure it establishes a pure state of terror that is beyond the simple use of violence.