

They are clearly not in that *trahison des clercs* which still knowingly promotes what we may now call a kind of galloping anomie; but looking straight at it in one of its primary places, they do not see it. This is a serious failing.

Reviewed by C. P. IVES

Violence and Authority

On Violence, by Hannah Arendt, *New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970. 106 pp. \$4.75, paper \$1.65.*

HANNAH ARENDT is one of those rare thinkers who can roam with ease and assurance in the various domains of the historian, political scientist, sociologist, and philosopher and speak with persuasiveness in each. As is typical of Miss Arendt's work, this book is replete with flashes of insight and, to use her phrase, "common sense," which is "nothing else but our mental organ for perceiving, understanding and dealing with reality and factuality." This book *On Violence* is divided into three major sections followed by numerous appendices. Through it all we find an analysis and critique of violence and a call for "action," which she characterizes as the particularly human capacity that

enables [a man] to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift—to embark on something new.

She goes on to say that "much of the present glorification of violence is caused by a severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world." The author's concern is to de-glorify violence, if you will.

In the final section Miss Arendt attacks the biological view of man as an inherent-

ly violent creature, and denies that "only the practice of violence [makes] it possible to interrupt the automatic processes in the realm of human affairs." Violence, as the author sees it, is neither glorious nor innate, nor is it inevitable.

The first section of this book is a fascinating scenario of various views of violence that forms a backdrop for a discussion of the nature of violence in the second part and the final critique. What is important to note about the first section is Miss Arendt's analysis of the current misunderstanding of Marxian theory by the proponents of the "new-left" ideology who claim on pseudo-Marxian grounds that violence is both inevitable and somehow "right." This discussion lends an air of urgency to Miss Arendt's own critique and especially to her notion of action as an alternative to violence. It is the second part, however, that calls for special attention.

In this section, Miss Arendt is primarily concerned to distinguish violence from power. In my view she overstates her case and, in doing so, confuses power with authority—a notion that receives little attention in this book. "Power," she tells us, "always stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements." I suspect that when Miss Arendt uses the term "power" here, as in almost every other case, she means "legitimate power," which is authority. Because she confuses these two distinct concepts, Miss Arendt's critique can easily be read as a defense of, at best, the *status quo* and, at worst, the view that "might makes right." This can be seen from such comments as "Power is indeed of the essence of government" and "Power is in need of no justification." A distinction between raw power and legitimate power is badly needed, but Miss Arendt's own brief analysis of authority fails to provide grounds for such a distinction. This is a serious omission.

I can only suggest an alternative view in brief outline here, but it seems to me that the move toward revolution (which Miss

Arendt traces for us) is a move from authority to power to force to violence to terror brought about by the progressive disintegration of each in turn. The line here is continuous and sharp differences are not always easy to detect, though they are very real. When the actual disintegration of any one of these phenomena has occurred is not always clear—as when purple shades off into deep blue. The distinction between power and violence on this line lies in the difference between the threat of force and the illegal use of force, and cannot be made to rest upon the incidental factor of the number of people who “support” (the author’s term) power. To recall an example the author uses in another context, one man with a machine gun can hold hundreds of well-organized people at bay. That the man with the gun has power seems obvious, but by no stretch of the imagination does this man’s power rest on support. It rests on the presence of an implement of violence: the machine gun.

Authority, on the other hand, most assuredly does rest on support—the “continuation of consent” in Miss Arendt’s terms—and an obligation to obey on the part of those who acknowledge the authority. It is precisely because Miss Arendt defines power in terms of “support” that the confusion between power and authority occurs.

This confusion leads to some troublesome inaccuracies in Miss Arendt’s analysis. She tells us, for example, that “we have seen in Viet Nam how an enormous superiority in the means of violence can become helpless if confronted with a well-organized opponent who is much more powerful.” But here again, power is not a function of numbers, as the author would lead us to believe. In this instance it is more plausible to argue that it is the situation in Viet Nam that has rendered the superior means of violence *ineffective*. Surely, to take the point one step farther, superiority is itself a function of effectiveness. The Viet Cong are more powerful because their use of violence in a guerilla war is more effective—not be-

cause they are more numerous than their enemy. It is quite possible in a particular case that superior numbers *might* constitute superior power (if there is no effective means of control, for example), but it is misleading to make this the heart of the matter. Thus I take exception to Miss Arendt’s comment that “Single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully.” I would suggest a change in the phrase “without others” to read “without effective means of enforcement,” as being more inclusive.

Another, perhaps more serious, confusion occurs in Miss Arendt’s claim that violence is “utterly incapable of creating” power. Surely, violence *can* create power. What it cannot create is *legitimate* power. Violence cannot transform power into authority. Machiavelli’s Prince cannot force his subjects to obey him willingly, but he can certainly force them to obey. All he needs is the threat of force: his word is law. History is replete with examples of men who have ruled with power but without authority.

I have concentrated on this section because the confusion I have noted weakens considerably the major thrust of Miss Arendt’s argument. In the final paragraph of her book, the author tells us that

. . . we know, or should know, that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence—if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.

Miss Arendt’s critique of violence is essentially a moral critique; that is, the disintegration of power into violence is viewed as *wrong*. It is, however, the disintegration of legitimate power, that is, authority, that is morally reprehensible. The call for action makes sense only if this is kept in mind: action seeks to legitimize power—to make men practice the ancient art of

citizenship. Once authority has deteriorated to the level of *mere* power (the threat of violence) the next move to actual violence is no longer a moral problem: it is a matter of survival.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER