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Caroline Ashcroft: Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, 320 p., 74.54 EUR

In her book, by looking through the conception of violence in Arendt's works, Caroline Ashcroft attempts to illuminate what politics is according to Arendt. Ashcroft's main project is to argue that there is a type of violence that is political and even necessary for politics in Arendt's opinion. She argues that the conception of violence and how to approach it, is an essential key to understand Arendt's political philosophy and to differentiate her philosophy from other contemporary understandings of the political, and even to distinguish between different interpretation of Arendt by authors such as Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig and Seyla Benhabib. In "On Violence," Arendt claims that there is an inverse proportionality between violence and political power. Power, according to her, arises if there is a free space for action, or sharing of perspectives, creating the common sense necessary for people's common worlds, and in other words, a coherent force of the political action. Violence is exactly what disturbs freedom, which is the raison d'être of politics and so violence is anti-political according to a typical reading of Arendt's "On Violence". But, as Ashcroft notes, taking this reading seriously, and overlooking Arendt's other writings leads many philosophers to interpret Arendt as a strict pacifist who "builds on an ideal of politics which is, indeed, absolutely free of violence"[1] (p.6). Some others think that Violence in Arendt's eye is always "unpolitical" and instrumental. But in contrast to all of these simplistic readings of Arendt, Ashcroft argues that "some forms of violence can indeed be reasonably considered political and even politically essential for Arendt" (p. 13). But how, in Arendt's framework, can violence be political?

Since power and action, as defined by Arendt, do exclude violence, Ashcroft argues that work, when it approaches production of tangible aspects of our cultural world, could be understood as an intrinsic part of politics in Arendtian thought (p. 52). Through initiation of shared understanding of our history, culture, tradition, and environment, our works can lead us to enter into the sphere of political life. But how does violence intertwine with the conception of work? Here Ashcroft reminds us what Arendt says in "The Crisis in Culture": "this element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature" (p. 54). I am not sure if Ashcroft equivocates the term "violence" here with its meaning in different works of Arendt. It seems to me that in *The Human Condition* and also in "What is authority?" Arendt is referring to a kind of violence immanent in human productive activity towards nature while the sort of violence that is the concern of political life is the kind of violence directed towards the freedom of human beings. In order to convince her readers, what Ashcroft needs is to demonstrate how Arendt's philosophy of technology

1 As quoted by Ashcroft from Frazer and Hatching. Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "On Politics and Violence: Arendt Contra Fanon," *Contemporary Political theory* 7, no. 1 (2008): 93.

could be related to her political philosophy; in other words, how the embedded violence in work can be linked with the kind of violence which is supposed to be an essential part of the conception of free action. This line of argument has not been pursued in this book and instead Ashcroft, by reading through all Arendt's works, especially the works prior to "On Violence", shows how the concept of violence shapes Arendt's conception of politics and enters into her understanding of political action.

Nevertheless, in chapter 2, Ashcroft distinguishes between Arendt's support of Jewish Army in early 1940s and her criticism of Zionist regime violence in Palestine after 1945 onward. She argues that the difference between Arendt's support of the Jewish army and her criticism of the aims of nationalist Zionism, "is clearly neither the presence of violence or call for violence, nor an argument for a Jewish state or polity of some kind" (p. 74). The difference, instead, is in where violence may justifiably be used in politics and where violence is anti-political. Contra Ashcroft, I think what is supported by Arendt in her famous paper in *Aufbau* is not violence inherent in this armed movement but "the national liberation of the Jewish people" (p. 67) and their freedom from anti-Semitism in all its forms. Violence seems to be a side effect of this freedom movement.

For many of us, Athens and Rome are sources of finding some models for understanding politics. Also for Arendt, as Ashcroft explains in chapter 3, it was in Athens and Rome, that politics as we understand it was created (p. 89). But Arendt sharply distinguishes between Greek and Roman politics. In Greek politics, legislation was understood to be outside politics or to be prepolitical. The law giver in Greek tradition was either God or the governor and normal citizens were not able to change the laws (p.101). However, for Romans the conception of legislation or lex—as later developed in Montesquieu's idea of "rapports"—helps to create a world or a political space that enables and promotes human free action (p. 101). This changeability of laws allowed Romans to legislate for immigrants, slaves, wars, insiders and outsiders. So, some sort of violence was introduced into Roman law in order to shape a new state. Ashcroft, by using this Arendtian distinction between the Greek and Roman political spheres, demonstrates that work—and thus an element of violence, as mentioned above—is in practice necessary for successful politics.

Roman prevailing tradition of politics influences the founding fathers of American revolution. In chapter 4, Ashcroft explains how Americans, according to Arendt, "understood the notion of action and power and managed to incorporate it, to a degree, into their revolution. The French Revolution, however, although it started with the best of intentions, failed to produce a successful political system because it failed to embody action and power" (p.110). But why would Arendt believe that the French Revolution was unsuccessful while the American was successful? In my reading of Arendt this is due to the blatant violence that was the subsequent of ordinary poor people act as labor out of need for food and money. In Arendt's words, the French Revolution was caused by "misery and want"[2] (p. 116). However, Ashcroft modifies this idea and says that it was not

2 . Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 68.

the appearance of violence that caused the failure of French Revolution, "but a new acceptance of the violence that emerged out of an ideology of the necessity of progress toward the 'natural' end of politics—a violence connected not with work but labor" (p.114). Still, it seems difficult for me to understand how the type of violence associated with work could be political.

In chapter 5, Ashcroft refers to an important point and shows that how the modern populist reading of the social and ever-increasing process of expansion in modern political systems, change our understanding of the world and our relationship to it (p.139). For Arendt, both Smith and Marx, both Capitalism and Socialism, are ideological systems that create the new politics of the social that rejects plurality and natality in favor of unity and determinism, which ultimately becomes the precursor of totalitarianism. (p. 141-6)

As already mentioned, Ashcroft main project is to argue that there is a type of violence that is necessary for political life according to Arendt. Of course, some "pre-political" violence which attaches to liberatory actions is legitimate but I think Arendt never, contra Ashcroft attempts, accepts any sort of violence as "political". In chapter 6 Ashcroft refers to many concrete examples of then contemporary issues, on which Arendt takes a stance: the subjects such as the Cold War and nuclear stalemate, the Pentagon papers on Vietnam War, and the civil disobedience movement in the United States. But I think none of these examples could help Ashcroft to strengthen her position. Politics requires power, according to Arendt and power as essentially antiviolence requires violence-free and ethical relationships among people towards freedom of individuals, media, and societies.

In the last chapter Ashcroft differentiates her reading of Arendt with some other contemporary interpretations, among them is Seyla Benhabib, who takes Arendt's notion of political action seriously and uses it as a foundation of her own political theory. Benhabib's deliberative model of democracy is proceduralist by recognition of the conflict of values and of interests that exists in any community towards establishment of social cooperation in the community. Ashcroft states that there are "certain realities of our political life that cannot be understood by ideal theories which seek the resolution of all substantive political problems through rational consensus or comprehensive theories of justice" (p. 230). I am not sure that Ashcroft rejoinder to Benhabib is cogent since Benhabib, as I understand her, is proposing a rational solution to the evil political life that we actually engage with. Her solution in communicative ethics seems not to be idealistic rather it is founded on an essential constituent of humanity that is political rationality.

Summing up, I appreciate reading Ashcroft's book and I recommend it to all scholars of political philosophy not only because of the importance of Arendt's ideas about power and violence but also because of Ashcroft's all-encompassing and deep reading of Arendt in this book. However, I suggest that this book could win through focusing more on the negative effects of violence on our political life. We must ban totalitarian regimes to be able to use the same argument as Ashcroft does to justify their violent and oppressive

actions. As it seems to me, Ashcroft "is simply reading too much into the work of a thinker who repeatedly argued against violence in politics and sought to separate violence from politics" (p. 236).

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