

Ramin Jahanbegloo: Hannah Arendt. The Illegitimacy of Violence

Review: Ramin Jahanbegloo: *Hannah Arendt. The Illegitimacy of Violence*. (London: Routledge, 2025), 104 pp., 190 € (hardback) / 50.99 € (paperback) / 45.89 € (ebook).

Ramin Jahanbegloo's *Hannah Arendt. The Illegitimacy of Violence* is a sophisticated and critical introduction to several themes in Arendt's thought. The main aim of the book is to describe the political implications of the complex bond between violence and politics, referring to Arendt's works and the possible contemporary field of application of her writings.

Jahanbegloo takes as his starting point the concept of nonviolence. Significantly, "nonviolence" is a single word, in order to consider it as an autonomous political notion. Arendt "is not a thinker of nonviolence" (p.1), but from the point of view of this concept Jahanbegloo provides a reflection about the opposite ends of democratic politics and totalitarian violence. The political idea of power, in Arendt, "deals with the existence of human beings in community" (p.15), in which the human plurality can exercise freedom in the public sphere. The exercise of freedom consists of "free discourse" (p.21) and "where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal" one can say that a "shared sovereignty" has emerged as power. In this sense, power is a dialogical (and political) bond between humans: it creates a political sphere and is by no means related to violence.

Jahanbegloo points out that violence is excluded from the political realm, since totalitarian societies "destroy the human capacity of assembly" (p. 22). Violence has indeed a totalitarian core and, according to Arendt, it could be justified but it can never be legitimate: violence wipes out protection provided from the society to individuals – the juridical person – as well as the moral personality, and it represents "a contradiction to all forms of social existence" (p. 33). One can of course use violence for certain ends, nevertheless it cannot be considered as a *political* action, to the extent that violence is a limit of politics, whose threshold the human condition of *vita activa* expires. Into this framework Arendt distinguishes between a violent revolutionary spirit – represented by the French Revolution – and a political one, acted by the American Revolution, strictly nonviolent.

Nonviolent revolution represents the political opposite of totalitarianism, for its capacity to split up power, violence and evil. What does evil mean in totalitarianism? The totalitarian violence holds all these elements in order to produce isolation, "self-deception, lies, stupidity" (p. 51), elements that "we cannot conceive as a 'radical evil'" (p. 49), but that "we have to see in their total banality" (p. 48). Jahanbegloo draws attention to the novelty of this concept – the banality of evil – which leads us to conceive that the stronger the totalitarian manipulation of individuals is, the more difficult it is to grasp the evil. The banality of evil doesn't imply that we could easily understand the deepest aim of

totalitarianism: “making human being as human beings superfluous” (p. 50). Indeed, totalitarian evil is produced by and produces on individuals “lack of judgment” (p. 47) and it is not a creative power, since it stays out of a public and shared discussion, it doesn’t recognize responsibilities, elements that make it even harder to understand.

Jahanbegloo ends his reflection on evil by focusing on the notion of forgiveness in Arendt. Forgiveness is not a moralistic concept or one that refers to a theological intention of purification. Rather, forgiveness is one of humanity’s most powerful capacities to rebuild the plurality that evil has wiped out, since forgiveness “originates clearly in the disdain for the cult of the individual life” (p. 54). Arendt uses this concept to point out the necessity of a “shared world [that] precedes the act of forgiving” (p. xx): thus, forgiveness imposes the recognition of the Other and their words within a public space, which makes it a purely political action and philosophically opposed to the principles of totalitarianism.

With the last chapter and the conclusion, Jahanbegloo offers an attempt to compare Arendt’s thought with some themes of the political application of nonviolence. In the last chapter, he starts from Arendt and Mahatma Gandhi: they “can be read as complementary” (p. 57), nevertheless “their moral spiritual differences cannot be reconciled”. Whereas in Gandhi civil society has a priority on political institutions as well as liberal democracy and its political practices, and nonviolence is connected to “a world-affirming and a world-loving political expression” (p. 59), Arendt conceives plurality and nonviolence into the political realm, although she “did not write directly on nonviolence” (p. 61). In this sense, nonviolence represents, as the title of the chapter suggests, a “promise” that has to do with the political and ethical stance of plurality in the face of violence – whether totalitarian or otherwise. If it is true that a “Nazi-state” is grounded on a prior creation of a “Nazi-man” (p. 62), then nonviolence is primarily a political task, insofar as it recalls an experience of freedom proper to individuals, and it must be considered as “a rule for all mankind, a categorical imperative” (p. 63). Jahanbegloo’s analysis goes far beyond Arendt’s writings, but we believe that he tries to conceive violence as the main anti-political element of totalitarianism: through the Gandhian reflection on nonviolence, Jahanbegloo finds the bond between individual and plurality that Arendt has ignored and that allows him to consider nonviolence as an ethical practice and a political-plural principle too.

In the Conclusion Jahanbegloo presents an attempt to grasp the Iranian revolution of 1978-9 with Arendtian concepts. He especially emphasises that the start of the uprising was close to a practice of nonviolence and the political mobilisation of a plurality. Jahanbegloo brings Arendt’s thought closer to the radical thinker Ali Shariati: in both, there is an idea of freedom that has to do with a political path leading to a constitution and the recognition of rights. Nevertheless, the subsequent Khomeinist turn of the revolution is problematised. To call Iranian society “totalitarian” is to use a “misnomer” (p. 71). Rather, the Islamic Republic has tried to become a “myth-making process”, through “Khomeini’s evocations of sacred memories and rituals” (p. 76) which have produced “the same kind of self-sacrifice of totalitarian societies [and] the glorification of martyrdom”, and “imprisonment, torture and killing of many political dissidents” (p. 77).

Despite these elements, for three reasons Iran differs from the idea of an accomplished Arendtian totalitarianism. Firstly, people of Iran “were never fully converted into masses” (p. 77): despite the state’s domination, the ability of people to organise themselves into militant political pluralities has never been lacking - as the Arab Spring and the Green Movement recently demonstrated. Secondly, “the long-term ineffectiveness of the Islamic Republic’s myth-making” (p. 77) has led to a kind of liberal phase of government in the mid-1990s.

The third reason is the most Arendtian element. Jahanbegloo points out that “Iranian society is still very much capable of creating new beginnings through a rediscovery of republican principles and forging new identities” (p. 78). In other words, Iranian society has led a fundamental resistance: it has not succumbed to the regime's one-sided narrative. In Arendtian terms, Jahanbegloo explains, Iranians have always resisted their ability to tell a new and different story. The “act of narrating” (p. 88) coincides with the “creation of a more participatory, inclusive public sphere” (p. 87): within this framework, the most political of human capacities for Arendt is realized, the appearance in public space. For Jahanbegloo, public appearance re-discovers the original intention of the Iranian revolution and of Ali Shariati, that is, the “collective action” (p. 84) which realises a people's own “faculty of freedom itself” (p. 83), with a perspective to a republican and constitutional regime. This intention, despite state’s violence, has never been lacking, and has often adopted a nonviolent nature. Thus, the Iranian case also shows how Arendt’s reflection, particularly the critique of the politics-violence nexus, is still useful to think again of a philosophical and political answer to the question “Why did they obey?” (p. 91), and to problematize the issue of our political responsibility in the face of power.

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