

## Political Violence and Race: A Critique of Hannah Arendt

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**Abstract:** Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1970) is a seminal work in the study of political violence. It famously draws a distinction between power and violence and argues that the latter must be excluded from the political sphere. Although this may make Arendt's text an appealing resource for critiques of rising political violence today, I argue that we should resist this temptation. In this article, I identify how the divisions and exclusions within her theory enable her to explicitly disavow violence on one level, while implicitly relying on a constitutive and racialized form of violence on another. In particular, Arendt leaves legal and state violence presumed, but untheorized, focusing her critique instead on dissident action, especially that of the Black Power movement. Any analysis that incorporates Arendt's conceptual distinctions is therefore susceptible to reproducing a political theory that neglects state violence in the service of White rule, yet charges those who resist it with breaching the peace.

**Chad KAUTZER**

### **Political Violence and Race: A Critique of Hannah Arendt**

Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1970) is a seminal work in the study of political violence. The theoretical core of Arendt's text is the categorical distinction she draws between power and violence and her claim that only the former, power, is appropriate to the political sphere. Like her friend Walter Benjamin, whose "Critique of Violence" (1921) has also become an influential text in analyses of political violence, Arendt focuses her critique on the instrumentality of violence. This instrumentality, she argues, is in principle inimical to political action and thus any attempt to use violence as a political means should be criticized and resisted without qualification.

This apparent categorical exclusion of violence from the political sphere is intuitively appealing and, given the mainstreaming of political violence today, Arendt's text may appear to be an obvious resource for contemporary critiques.<sup>1</sup> In the following, I present reasons for resisting this temptation and identify the ways in which her critique of violence is complicit with the violent logic of a different order. I begin by reconstructing elements of Benjamin's critique, in part because the alternative to violence his text presents is quite similar to Arendt's own in important ways. Both seek to identify a form of nonviolent and unmediated or non-instrumental action beyond the law, and a comparison of their texts proves mutually illuminating on this point. Despite this similarity, however, their texts are otherwise fundamentally opposed. Arendt never references Benjamin's essay in *On Violence* or other works. It is possible she was unaware of it, but her critique is in some ways uncannily its opposite. Whereas Benjamin focuses his critique on the violence of the law and the state and seeks to identify forms of dissident action that could (and should) undermine both, Arendt focuses her critique on dissident action, particularly that of the Black Power movement, leaving legal and state violence presumed, but untheorized. That presumption was precisely the target (and starting point) of Benjamin's essay, and thus we find that his central thesis concerning the violence of law has critical traction against Arendt's argument.

Having reconstructed relevant components of Benjamin's argument, I turn to Arendt's critique of political violence, first outlining her distinctions between the political, social, and private spheres, which are explicit in other works, but operate only implicitly in *On Violence*. This enables us to identify how the divisions and exclusions in Arendt's text allow her to explicitly disavow violence on one level while implicitly relying on a constitutive and racialized form of violence on another. Any contemporary analysis that incorporates Arendt's critique of violence is, I argue, susceptible to also reproducing her pernicious racial politics, which neglect state (and white vigilante) violence while charging those who resist it with breaching the peace. The following is thus intended as a cautionary tale.

#### **Benjamin and the Violence of the Law**

Benjamin and Arendt developed a close friendship in the 1930s, during their time together in Paris with other German émigrés, including Arendt's future husband, Heinrich Blücher (Young-Bruehl 115-63). Blücher had participated in the Spartacist Uprising of 1919 in Berlin (Eiland and Jennings 580-81), which was intentionally undermined by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). The SPD collaborated with elements of the German bourgeoisie, military command, and right-wing paramilitary Freikorps throughout the German Revolution. It was a calculated strategy to solidify SPD rule in the new Weimar Republic and to prevent the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) from turning an uprising into a communist revolution. This betrayal of the revolutionary moment soured Benjamin—and others like Herbert Marcuse, a member of a Leftist civilian security force in Berlin at the time (Kellner 14-18)—on both the SPD and Weimar's parliamentary republic system.

In his now famous essay "Critique of Violence," Benjamin described parliaments, including Germany's at the time, as falling into decay because they had forgotten that they "represent a lawmaking violence" and that it was a revolutionary force that brought them into existence (244). In a tone haunted by the exterminating violence soon to come—and admired at the time by fascist jurist

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States, a major political party is giving ideological support to the proliferation of fascist street gangs. The National Rifle Association recently declared that academic, political, and media "elites" are America's greatest domestic threats, fueling a tactical turn in American gun culture that equates freedom with firearms and encourages military-style training in preparation for a civil war. The President of the United States repeatedly encourages violence against journalists and political opponents and has explicitly directed the police to exercise more violence against suspects. Similar trends in the normalization of political violence are evident in recent authoritarian movements around the globe.

Carl Schmitt—Benjamin claimed that it was little wonder parliaments “cannot achieve decrees worthy of this violence, but cultivate in compromise a supposedly nonviolent manner of dealing with political affairs” (244). Benjamin did not, however, intend for his critique of the “supposedly nonviolent manner” of law to contribute to the establishment of a more suitable parliament. His intention was rather to comprehend a kind of non-instrumental violence that could undo law and thus the state—an anarchical vision quite different from the statist dreams of German conservatives and fascists like Schmitt (Derrida 281-82). Benjamin’s messianic term for this exceptional possibility is “divine violence.”

In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin’s focus on the relation of violence to law and justice involved a shift away from the (justificatory) question of ends and toward the more radical question of whether violence could ever be an appropriate means. As a radical critique, it was directed straight at the principle of violence itself—the “violence-laden character of the law,” as Marcuse called it (124)—regardless of the ends it serves. His project was therefore not to determine the normative constraints of violence within a legal order, but to address the question of whether violence, as a principle, was ever justified (“Critique” 236). He concluded that it could not be. Because both the positing of law and its enforcement are pernicious—insofar as violence is “necessarily and intimately bound to it” (248)—Benjamin reasoned that the legal order itself must be transcended and this could only be done through the “pure means [reines Mittel]” of divine violence.

Influenced by the revolutionary moment of 1919 and Georges Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence* (1908), the only candidate Benjamin believed could qualify as non-instrumental violence is the labor strike. Not every strike does, however. Indeed, strikes are often used for what Benjamin describes as a means of extortion, that is to achieve some goal concerning pay, benefits, or working conditions. In these cases, which are most common, the strike takes on an instrumental or “political” form (239). However, when a strike becomes revolutionary, as the general strike in Berlin in 1919 threatened to become, it exceeds instrumentality and become a “pure means.” Benjamin claims that the task of this general or revolutionary strike is the destruction of state power, not the establishment of law (246).<sup>2</sup>

This exceptional, non-instrumental kind of violence had, according to Benjamin, the potential to negate legal violence altogether and thus make possible justice. Werner Hamacher summarizes Benjamin’s point this way: “Politics and violence can be termed pure only if they manifest a form of justice, untainted by the interests of preserving or mandating certain ways of life, untainted by positive forms of law” (1133). There are two different moments being described here. The first is the negation or overcoming of legal violence through the pure means of the revolutionary strike, which in a sense clear out the violent instrumentality structuring social relations. The second moment concerns how the dissolution of the state and legal order affords the possibility of a generalized nonviolent politics or sociality. Here, Benjamin entertained the possibility of a politics of pure, nonviolent means, which cultivated communicative virtues and resolved conflicts “beyond all legal systems and therefore beyond violence” (247). The possibility of the latter, Benjamin argues, can be located in an already existing “sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language” (245).<sup>3</sup> Although this non-instrumental option is strengthened through the cultivation of certain subjective preconditions, such as “courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust” (244), one need not be motivated by such virtues. The concern that violent conflict would be too costly, says Benjamin, is sufficient to move even the most reluctant. He uses the example of diplomats who rarely utilize legal contracts, relying instead on private and

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin has characterized this as the blasting open of the continuum of history in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) through revolutionary violence described as “pure immediate violence” (“Critique” 252). It is a kind of depositing (*Entsetzung*) or what Werner Hamacher describes as *affirmation*. “On the breaking [*Durchbrechung*] of this cycle maintained by mythic forms of law, on the suspension [*Entsetzung*] of law with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it,” writes Benjamin, “finally therefore on the abolition of state power [*Staatsgewalt*], a new historical epoch is founded” (251-52). On Hamacher’s reading, the suspension or affirmative moment is, for Benjamin, not a performance or a counter-positing of the law, but rather a kind of “absolute precondition of every historical positing violence” (1139, fn12).

<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin, language is evidence of a nonviolent form of sociality and is thus be invoked as support for a radical critique of violence. It is a “pure means,” writes Derrida, in which “the means/ends relation is suspended,” and therefore demonstrates that “the non-violent elimination of conflicts is possible in the private world when it is ruled by the culture of the heart, cordial courtesy, sympathy, love of peace, trust, friendship” (284). In this world, social coordination is carried out by agreement, not contract, and the instrumental mechanisms of the state play no part. Language for Benjamin is thus, writes Daniel Loick, a “sphere that simultaneously guarantees and anticipates the possibility of a world beyond the law” (223). For an elaboration on this possible world, see Loick, *A Critique of Sovereignty* 210-216.

delicately negotiated informal agreements. This is an example of what Jürgen Habermas would call communicative, as opposed to instrumental, action.<sup>4</sup> Language, as a pure means of capable of governing "peaceful intercourse between private persons" (245) is thus analogous to the pure means of the general strike, which can suspend the legal order.

Although I discuss Arendt's notion of power at greater length momentarily, it is useful to note here that Benjamin's idea of language as being "wholly inaccessible to violence" and capable of cultivating mutual understanding without coercion is echoed in Arendt's notion of power as generated by non-instrumental speaking and acting in concert. She calls it the "force of mutual promise" (*Human Condition* 245). It is this power that Arendt proffers as an alternative to violence in the political sphere. Jürgen Habermas, whose own theory of communicative action can be situated in this tradition, argues that Arendt's notion of power—and by extension Benjamin's notion of language as pure means—is based on interlocutors using language "for the noncoercive establishment of intersubjective relations" or illocutionarily, rather than as "to instigate other subjects to a desired behavior" or perlocutionarily ("Hannah Arendt" 6; also Habermas "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism").<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin's text was first anthologized in 1955 in a volume edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno, and again ten years later in a collection edited by Herbert Marcuse, this time prominently featured in the collection's title: *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (*The Critique of Violence and Other Essays*). Despite the interest in Benjamin's text in the 1950s and 1960s, it failed to appear in the first English anthology of his work, *Illuminations* (1968), edited by Arendt. It was not until the publication of the collection *Reflections* (1978), edited by Peter Demetz, that Benjamin's text was made available in English.

### **Violence and the Policing of Distinctions**

Long before the publication of *On Violence* in 1970, Arendt was engaged in the study of violence in the contexts of war, revolution, imperialism, and the relations of the private and social spheres. These earlier studies were critical in the Kantian sense of critique, namely, identifying distinctions and enforcing them, rather than rejecting a principle or practice *in toto*. As Kant claimed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the utility of critique is analogous to that of the police: it secures order and defends proper boundaries, rather than building something new (e.g. doctrine). To deny the importance of this function, Kant argues, "would be as much as to say that the police are of no positive utility because their chief business is to put a stop to the violence that citizens have to fear from other citizens, so that each can carry on his own affairs in peace and safety" (115; also Arendt *Lectures on Kant's* 31-35).<sup>6</sup>

Arendt's entire body of work is engaged in identifying and policing boundaries. She often defends the importance of making distinctions in the face of what she describes as the tendency to believe "everything can eventually be called anything else" ("What is Authority?" 95). In *On Violence*, she describes the failure to distinguish concepts, such as power, strength, force, violence, and authority as a "sad reflection on the present state of political science" (43). Her published reply to a review of two of her books in the *New York Review of Books* is titled "Distinctions," because she felt the reviewer failed to draw enough of them ("Distinctions"). Even her conception of human flourishing, most explicitly articulated in *The Human Condition*, culminates in individuals disclosing themselves as "distinct and unique persons" (183), i.e. clearly distinguishing themselves from others. We can also detect this method at work in her description of Benjamin as a theorist: Her longest analysis of Benjamin appears as the introduction to *Illuminations*, which Arendt begins by explaining why it is so difficult to clearly categorize his work and notes that it was rare for Benjamin to "define what he was doing" ("Walter Benjamin" 4). Her general response to what she saw as the vagaries haunting both

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<sup>4</sup> For Habermas, different social actors can coordinate their action plans by violent means or through the "illocutionary forces of speech." When the latter reign, language acts as the "primary source of social integration" and then one can speak of "communicative action" (*Between Facts and Norms* 17-18).

<sup>5</sup> We can also view these non-instrumental intersubjective relations as primordial. Benjamin uses dialogue (*Unterredung*), which generates mutual understanding (*Übereinkunft*), as an example of pure mediacy or, as Hamacher describes it, "the condition of possibility of instrumental language" ("Affirmative, Strike" 1141). Arendt will characterize the noncoercive and intersubjective nature of power as "the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category" (*On Violence* 51).

<sup>6</sup> For Kant, the boundaries of speculative reason needed to be identified and enforced, so we could exercise practical reason without fear of transgression (*Critique of Pure Reason* 114).

theory and practice was to structure her texts around the particular distinctions and the Weberian ideal types she believed were in urgent need of clarification.

Arendt viewed this method of making distinctions and stipulating definitions as essentially Aristotelian. In a rare reflection on method, she writes: "I always start anything by saying, 'A and B are not the same.' And this, of course, comes right out of Aristotle" ("On Hannah Arendt" 338). This comment was prompted by Mary McCarthy's characterization of her as exhibiting "a medieval habit of thought" (Arendt "On Hannah Arendt" 337), but given the explicit policing function of her theorizing, the above association with Kant is more appropriate. Jacques Rancière refers to Arendt's method as the partitioning or distributing of the sensible "*le partage du sensible*" (36) and more specifically to her categorical separation of the social and political spheres as the "logic of the police" (206).

In works such as *The Human Condition*, the question of violence, for Arendt, is not whether it should exist in contemporary life, but rather where it is appropriate. Indeed, she views violence as both necessary and enabling of the emergence of a republican political sphere in which individuals can participate nonviolently and as equals. Once such distinctions have been made, the boundaries between the various forms of practical life—what Arendt refers to as the *vita activa*—can be properly maintained. Understanding how Arendt identifies the boundaries between the political, social, and private spheres of the *vita activa* helps us identify why she claims that violence in both the social and private spheres simultaneously enables, yet is prohibited from, the political realm. Once we illuminate her distinctions, we can identify how, despite Arendt's efforts to elide the role of state violence in the political sphere (*On Revolution* 9), such violence remains central—not only to the origin of the political realm, but also to its maintenance and the formation of the individuals Arendt so poetically eulogizes.

Arendt's historical narrative of the emergence of distinct social spheres with their own particular relations, activities, and objectives is one of slow degeneration over the centuries, yet she recounts it with a sense of political urgency. Using ancient Greece as her model, Arendt begins with a dualistic model in which there are two distinct realms of life: the private household, which is the sphere of labor, material needs, and unequal relations of rule, and the political sphere, which is the realm of freedom and equality. One of the distinctive characteristics of modernity is the emergence of a third sphere, the "social," which is a sphere of work that is neither public nor private and thus blurs the boundary between the two: "In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself" (*Human Condition* 33). This is the sphere of socialized production, which moves production out of the household, and "mass society", which mitigates individualization. When mass society has "devoured all strata of the nation," says Arendt, conformism rules and renders distinction and difference merely "private matters" (*Human Condition* 45, 41; also *The Origins* 407-32).

Given Arendt's commitments to clear boundaries, to individual freedom, and to the ability to distinguish oneself in the public realm through such freedom, the encroachment of the social into the political sphere represents a triple threat. It threatens to (a) turn the political sphere into a means rather than an end, which (b) undermines the conditions of freedom, and exerts a downward equalizing force that (c) contributes to massification rather than individual distinction: "the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm" (*Human Condition* 33; also "What is Freedom?" 155). Arendt relatedly argues in her "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959) that equality of opportunity in education through school integration is a dangerous step toward a mass society insofar as it undermines social hierarchies, which, in the context school integration are, one must conclude, racial hierarchies. "Mass society—which blurs lines of discrimination and levels group distinctions—is a danger to society as such," she writes (51). It is little wonder that this essay was controversial at the time, even leading to a yearlong delay in its publication. It was intended for the magazine *Commentary*, which commissioned it, but their alarm and hesitation about publishing it eventually caused Arendt to withdraw it (Young-Bruehl 308-18). A year later *Dissent* decided to publish it, albeit with a disclaimer: "We publish it not because we agree with it—quite the contrary!—but because we believe in freedom of expression even for views that seem to us entirely mistaken" ("Reflections" 45).

In Arendt's theory, labor (private), work (social), and action (political) are the three categories of the active life (*vita activa*), which determine proper social relations and indicate whether or not violence and inequality is acceptable. Arendt argues that the political is the only sphere in which the individual can become distinct and yet exercise freedom as an equal. It is also the only sphere in which violence is antithetical to its specific form of *vita activa*. In *On Revolution* and *The Human Condition*, the sphere of politics is the exemplification of non-violent social coordination, whereas in the private and social spheres violence is considered natural. The near exclusion of violence from the political realm is an explicit rejection of Max Weber's argument in "Politics as a Vocation" (1919) that

politics is a social relation of domination predicated on violence (*On Violence* 35-36). Such violence is, she writes, only appropriate to those forms of rule found in the private sphere, i.e. "home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers," and is a characteristic of labor in the private sphere and work in the social sphere. When the private and public spheres fail to retain a clear boundary, as happens in authoritarian regimes, state despotism can also be "likened to the organization of the household" (*Human Condition* 27).

Arendt refers to the violence of the private and social spheres as "prepolitical," rather than non-political, because she sees them as necessary conditions for the emergence of the political and thus of freedom. "Because all human beings are subject to necessity," she writes, "they are entitled to violence toward others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world" (*Human Condition* 31). By "necessity of life," Arendt is referring to the conditions necessary for the maintenance of biological life and health. The household (*oikia*) is a private sphere, in which we labor for the satisfaction of need and we are, in this condition, what she calls *animal laborans*. When Arendt speaks of overcoming the necessary labor of the private sphere, she does not mean that we somehow transcend biological needs, but rather that we are able to compel others to do the labor necessary to satisfy our needs. One can therefore be liberated from labor, but this liberation entails social domination or, historically speaking, mastery over the labor of women, children, paid workers, and unpaid slaves. In the context of ancient Greece, with which Arendt begins her narrative, her focus is on slave labor: "force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves—and to become free" (*Human Condition* 31). The private sphere is thus a place of fundamental inequality and unfreedom, which Arendt claims is a precondition for the fundamental equality and freedom of the political sphere.

This constitutive relation of the private and political is not, however, limited to the ancient world. In her critique of school desegregation in the U.S., for example, Arendt makes clear that equality should be limited to the political sphere and not sought in the private or social realms, the latter being the site of public education: "For equality not only has its origin in the body politic; its validity is clearly restricted to the political realm" ("Reflections" 50). Indeed, Arendt describes the discrimination in the social sphere, which includes racial discrimination in public educational institutions, as a "social right" grounded in the freedom of association, whereas equality is only a political right ("Reflections" 51). Arendt asserts that she is against legally enforced segregation, but not the "social custom" of segregation (49). Racial discrimination exercised by individuals and non-state organizations should therefore be protected, she concludes. "The question," writes Arendt, "is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive" (51). It was a classic example of critique as policing boundaries, but one that evidenced how categorical distinctions could become complicit with the perpetuation of racialized violence and inequality.

In addition to the violence used as a means to compel others to carry out the labor necessary to satisfy needs—namely, the violence of social domination—Arendt also describes labor and work as forms of violence. The labor of the private sphere involves killing, destroying, interrupting, and in the case of minerals and stone, tearing them "out of the womb of the earth" (*Human Condition* 139). Such violence enacted against objects (as opposed to subjects) is even more pronounced in the work of the social sphere (*homo faber*), which fabricates semi-permanent objects for use, including the physical infrastructure that supports the political sphere. Moreover, all workmanship harbors "an element of violence" (*Human Condition* 130). Significantly, Arendt argues that the violence of work contributes to subject formation in ways that would seemingly prepare one for successful participation in the political sphere: "The experience of this violence [of work] is the most elemental experience of human strength and, therefore, the very opposite of the painful, exhausting effort experienced in sheer labor. It can provide self-assurance and satisfaction, and can even become a source of self-confidence throughout life" (*Human Condition* 140). In her earlier work, Arendt thus identifies three positive effects of violence: its effect on others (coercion), on objects (transformation), and on the self (confidence). None of these acceptable effects are, however, discussed in *On Violence*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Arendt's account of self-confidence reminds one of Hegel's narrative of the bondsman, who is denied recognition by the lord, but realizes "it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (119). It falls short of the social condition of mutual recognition, but is a reflection of the bondsman's previous unacknowledged capacity for negation and the comprehension of this is a constitutive moment in the development of self-consciousness. Indeed, Arendt's three acceptable forms of violence are all similarly constructive forms of negation in Hegel's account, which influenced Sartre and Fanon.

Arendt's positive assessment of the effects of violence on subject formation is particularly surprising, however, given her later critique of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre in *On Violence* for asserting that violence can have precisely such a desirable and transformative quality. Fanon, for example, famously described decolonial violence as contributing to a psychological sense of empowerment and confidence, similar to that noted by Arendt: "It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence" (51). And it was this effect, and not just the protection of biological life, which inspired many in the Black Power movement in the United States (Kautzer "Notes"). I return to Arendt's critique of this view—often referred to today as the decolonization of consciousness—after addressing her model of the political sphere as nonviolent.

Again, as a sphere of freedom, the political realm is free not only from need, but also from the kinds of violence proper to other spheres: the violence of social domination as well as that of labor and work. Most importantly, the strategic nature of violence is incompatible with the power that keeps the political realm in existence (*Human Condition* 199). Indeed, Arendt argues, they are opposites (*On Violence* 56). Throughout history, according to Arendt, most political theorists have failed to properly distinguish power and violence, a distinction she sketches in detail in *The Human Condition* (22-78; 199-207). The fact that she reproduces this account at length in *On Violence* (35-56), demonstrates its importance to her critique of decolonial thought and the Black Power movement and her belief that, despite their success in the civil rights and anti-war movements, "the adherents of nonviolence are on the defensive" (14).

### **Power, the Political, and the Exception to Nonviolence**

Power relates to our ability to act in concert, says Arendt. It is therefore located not within the individual, but in the relations among individuals, i.e. in the group, and when the group disbands so too does this power (*On Violence* 44). In *The Human Condition*, she refers to the space in which this acting and speaking in concert is made possible as the "space of appearance" (199). "In acting and speaking," Arendt writes, "men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (179). This form of publicity allows us to make ourselves known to each other as individuals and thus to obtain social recognition. It is the basis of the polis, which also acts as "a kind of organized remembrance" (198).<sup>8</sup> The power generated within this polis is, Arendt argues, the *potestas in populo* or the power of the people necessary for government. Because it is "inherent in the very existence of political communities," she writes, this power needs no justification. Unlike violence, which is essentially instrumental, power is an end in itself (*On Violence* 51). The government and the rule of law are, according to Arendt, materializations of this nonviolent power of the people, so when "the living power of the people ceases to uphold them," state institutions "petrify and decay" (*On Violence* 40-1).

Benjamin made nearly the opposite point in his "Critique of Violence," arguing that parliaments relied on the violence, rather than power, that brought them into being and that maintained them: "When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears the institution falls into decay" (244). Indeed, Benjamin issued a warning against the mistaken belief that existing political affairs are actually dealt with in a "nonviolent manner" (244). For him, all law-making and all law-preserving action, as well as all productions and enforcements of legal contracts, preserve the "latent presence" of violence or explicitly exercise it. The solution to violence was not therefore a better government or more just law: "however desirable and gratifying a flourishing parliament might be by comparison, a discussion of means of political agreement that are in principle nonviolent cannot be concerned with parliamentarianism," writes Benjamin. "For what a parliament achieves in vital affairs can be only those legal decrees that in their origin and outcome are attended by violence" (244).

Arendt emphatically argues that nonviolent action is the *vita activa* of the political sphere, whereas work and labor—as instrumental and violent—characterize the social and private spheres respectively. It is power, as an "end in itself," that takes center stage in the political sphere, with violence excluded to the extent that Arendt does not consider the instrumentality of state action and legal violence. In this, Arendt is following Kant, not only in the aforementioned method of critique as policing boundaries, but in what she takes to be Kant's understanding of political action as well: "Kant did not mean to formulate or conceptualize the tenets of the utilitarianism of his time, but on the contrary

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<sup>8</sup> According to Arendt, one of the most dissatisfying elements of the sphere of labor is that human activity "left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance" (*Human Condition* 81).

wanted first of all to relegate the means-end category to its proper place and prevent its use in the field of political action" (*Human Condition* 156).

This understanding of the political sphere as largely non-violent and of political action as non-instrumental is rather remarkable when judged by Arendt's own method. The political is not defined by acts of governing, lawmaking, or positing rights, which are more or less absent from other spheres of practical activity (*vita activa*) and thus make them logical candidates for drawing clear distinctions. Unlike in Benjamin's critique, Arendt does not consider the overcoming of violence to be a condition for the presence of justice. Sheldon Wolin argues that this silence concerning justice is directly related to another "extraordinary omission" in Arendt's theory, namely, the state. "That one could claim to have a politics without discussing the state is perhaps the result of her Greek starting-point" (296). While it is true that Arendt's classifications reflect her attention to ancient Greece, it is her attempt to represent complex human relations and institutions with one form of practical activity (e.g. labor, work, action) that leads her to confounding conclusions. She not only excludes the coercive powers of the state—from its legal order to the exercise of its military violence—from the political, but does not account for such violence in any other sphere either. The state, which Wolin rightly refers to as the "greatest concentration of coercive power in history" (296), is almost entirely banished to the interstices of Arendt's categories.

We saw that the structure of Arendt's theory forefronts three fundamental types of human activity (i.e. the *vita activa*). These types are, in ascending order of importance, labor, work, and action, and each corresponds to "one of the basic conditions under which life on earth was given to man" (*Human Condition* 7). Arendt's focus on the importance of these human activities for understanding the "human condition" is a corrective to what she considers a problematic prioritization of the *vita contemplativa* in the history of philosophical thought. In addition to this elevation of the importance of the *vita activa* over contemplation, her work is, as we have seen, also motivated by a desire to clarify what she views as the "blurred... distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself" (17).

Arendt has thus defined the human condition through four fundamental ways of being in the world—contemplation (*theōria*), labor, work, and action—none of which capture the violence of war, revolution, law enforcement, punishment, colonialism, slavery, state and sub-state terrorism, vigilantism, domestic violence, or the defensive violence practiced by individuals and communities against these. Whether the prevalence and profound influence of such violence in our lives, past and present, should make it worthy of its own category in an account of the human condition is not a question I entertain here. It is clear, however, that this tripartite model simply cannot accommodate the above forms of violence, so something has to give.

Arendt's unsatisfying solution to this problem is to introduce state violence as an exception. In a parenthetical remark, she concedes that instrumental activities such as governing and lawmaking (i.e. the forms of rule that Weber highlighted as involving violence) do in fact also take place in the political sphere: "This is, of course, not to deny that governments pursue policies and employ their power to achieve prescribed goals," she writes (*On Violence* 51). However, no proposal is made for how we are to reconcile this claim with her previous assertions that exclude just this kind of instrumentality. In the rare moments when Arendt acknowledges state violence in the political sphere, it is cast in terms of the "last resort" (*On Violence* 47, 51, 63). It is only appropriately exercised against a criminal, rebel, or foreign enemy, she argues and can only be used to "keep the power structure intact" (*On Violence* 47). For Arendt, violence in the political sphere is thus construed as unusual, not foundational. It is evidence of a breakdown in proper relations, and its exceptional use is only justified when it serves to uphold the power structure: "Violence appears where power is in jeopardy" (*On Violence* 56). Benjamin would agree that these are examples of instrumental violence, although add that such violence is not exceptional, but latent in the law itself.

Beyond the problem that state and legal violence pose for Arendt's distinctions, the non-instrumental power said to define the political sphere is arguably also present in the social and private spheres as well. Because justice is not the goal of action, according to Arendt, one can imagine the power of speaking and acting in concert characterizing religious practices, collaborative projects in civil society, as well as song, dance, theater, and storytelling. It is not clear where to situate these activities in Arendt's *vita activa* model.

These categories (or activities) serve in part as the normative ground of Arendt's critique—they have "normative content" (Habermas 7)—determining whether and to what degree inequality, discrimination, and violence are acceptable in a particular sphere of life. Arendt describes both labor and work as inherently instrumental and violent toward the world of objects, and thus it follows that such violence, which serves as the normative ground of her critique, need not be justified. Although Arendt does not discuss this in *On Violence*, she has also argued in *The Human Condition* that coercion

and violence toward subjects (and not just objects) are justified when used to exit the private sphere of necessity and participate in the political realm of freedom. As Robert Bernasconi concludes, "it would seem that one of the preconditions of being human is the inhumanity of exploiting the labor of others" ("The Double Face" 6; also Arendt, *Human Condition* 119-20; *On Revolution* 110). The political is therefore dependent upon, but prioritized over, the private and social spheres. Finally, inequality and discrimination are, according to Arendt, acceptable in both the private and the social spheres, but not in the political sphere, where speaking and acting among equals is the non-coercive means for revealing oneself and receiving recognition within a heterogeneous community.

### **Racial Violence and the Political Sphere**

Arendt's *ad hoc* approach to theorizing violence in the political sphere in *On Violence* is more than simply dissatisfying by the standards of theory construction. It obfuscates the ways in which violence is inextricably bound to the political sphere. These include (a) the way violence is involved in subject formation and (b) how it serves as a means of overcoming necessity in order to gain entry into the political realm. As we have seen, neither of these is represented by Arendt's categories of action or power, which points toward a normative gap in her analysis: If power is an end in itself and action is the non-coercive activity serving as the source of normativity, neither state violence nor resistance to it can be justified by appealing to power or the *vita activa* of the political sphere.

Concerning subject formation, although Arendt did parenthetically concede in *The Human Condition* that the violence of workmanship "can even become a source of self-confidence" (140), she otherwise treats violence as an external means. It is conceptualized as an instrument to "multiply natural strength" (*On Violence* 46) rather than playing, as Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings write, a "structuring role in the ways individual and collective actors are produced and reproduced in both private and public domains of power" (104-05).<sup>9</sup> Arendtian politics therefore "remains haunted by the violence it supposedly excludes" (94) and inconsistent insofar as it rejects the positive effect of violence on subject formation when espoused by those, such as Fanon and Sartre, who advocate resistance (*On Violence* 11-13).

Concerning the overcoming of necessity, such an achievement entails relations of social domination and an unequal distribution of risk, responsibility, and toil. These are social structures or informal relations of rule that afford some, argues Arendt, the leisure for political action among peers. These relations of rule are reproduced through hierarchical cultural norms and coercive measures by both state and sub-state agents. Arendt has, for example, likened state despotism to the "uncontested, despotic powers" of the head of household in the private sphere (*Human Condition* 27). One's location within these relations of rule has implications for subject formation and, more specifically for our discussion here, racial formation. Such forms of rule produce groups structurally vulnerable to violence and are therefore always contested, which in turn necessitates continuous policing and coercion to sustain them (Kautzer, *Radical Philosophy* 105-34).

It is not clear whether Arendt's perspective on race influenced the structure of her theory or if the structure of her theory influenced her problematic views on race. What is clear, however, is that the divisions of her theoretical framework, including the categorical exclusion of violence from the political sphere (beyond exceptional circumstances), reinforce a strategy in *On Violence* to undermine justifications for Black resistance. The quotidian and spectacular violence of White rule (both within and beyond the state) is ignored, deemed reasonable, or characterized as defensive. Throughout her text, Arendt invalidates Black experiences, history, and epistemic authority, and neglects abundant evidence of life-defining racism throughout U.S. history and contemporary institutions. Ignoring this "racialized state violence and dominance," writes Joy James, "allows Arendt to construct a theory of power that floats freely above a foundation mired in racially fashioned domination" (252). This free-floating notion of power in turn serves as the normative ground for her critique of violent resistance. Moreover, the marginalization of violence in the service of White rule, and the categorical exclusion of violence from the *vita activa*, make any justification for resistance seemingly disappear. Arendt makes no mention of either the violent history of colonization, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow, or of the legacy of inequality and racist cultural norms they produced.<sup>10</sup> She provides no account of the role white

<sup>9</sup> Violence "is not, at the start, presumptively 'outside'," writes Judith Butler. "Violence and non-violence are not only strategies or tactics, but form the subject and become its constitutive possibilities" (165).

<sup>10</sup> Arendt discusses some of these topics in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she is keen to distinguish the imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the centuries of European colonialism that preceded it. Arendt argues that racism only emerged in the late nineteenth century as a "powerful ideology of imperialist policies" (158), whereas a non-ideological and more innocuous "race thinking" marked the colonial

terrorism and militias had in shaping the conditions of Indigenous and Black political participation, wealth accumulation, and education, nor is there any recognition of the history of resistance to such White violence, from John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, to Robert F. Williams, the American Indian Movement, the Brown Berets, and the Deacons for Defense and Justice.

Arendt ignores the history and function of state-sanctioned violence in reproducing White domination—through its own institutions or by tolerating the racist violence of non-state agents—making resistance to it appear as unprovoked. In turn, she views the violence of the state and White communities as defensive and thus justified. In *On Violence*, Arendt mocks “Negro demands” as “silly and outrageous,” claims “the Negro community moodily indulges” in “fantasies” (95), asserts that “black rage” is “irrational” (65), and describes accusations of a “police state” as “meaningless” (15). She describes Black Power activists as “glorifying violence” (12, 14, 19, 65, 71, 75, 83), or practicing “racism in reverse” (65), and, what is worse, hypocritically attempting to provoke a nonviolent state into becoming violent in order to prove its supposed violent nature (66). Arendt faults the “guilt feelings” of Whites (19; See also 95) for leading them to take the “irrational” claims of Black activists more seriously than the “disinterested and usually highly moral claims of the white rebels” (19).

Arendt’s implicit assumption is that White violence has not been significant and there has not yet developed a racist ideology among Whites to support such violence. Indeed, the Black Power movement and Black community uprisings could, she writes, “provoke a really violent white backlash, whose greatest danger would be the transformation of white prejudices into a full-fledged racist ideology for which ‘law and order’ would indeed become a mere façade” (77). She made a similar claim in her *New York Times Magazine* article “Lawlessness Is Inherent in the Uprooted” (1968), wherein she warned that the “lawlessness” of the Black community was creating the real danger of “a white backlash” (24). In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argued that racism emerged in nineteenth-century imperialism, not European colonization, but racism is not viewed by Arendt as a cynical justification for plunder, rape, enslavement, and murder. It was, she argues, rather the logical reaction of frightened, yet “civilized” European imperialists (185). In *On Violence*, she similarly argued that Black violence could ultimately push the White community to rationally endorse “the invisible terror of a police state for law and order in the streets” (77).

While Arendt found talk of a police state among activists to be “meaningless,” the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) was in full swing, harassing, imprisoning, and murdering activists. It was a secret police state that collaborated with the Chicago police in 1969 to assassinate Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party—one year after J. Edgar Hoover described the Black Panther Party as the greatest domestic threat to U.S. national security (James 257). State violence was not, of course, limited to activists of color. The year *On Violence* was published, members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed protestors at Kent State University, killing four white students (two of whom were simply walking to class) and wounding nine more.

Although much more could be said about Arendt’s views on race and racism generally such examples demonstrate how these views intersect with and influence her normative theorizing about

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period. By coupling colonialism with race thinking and imperialism with racism, Arendt creates a theory with clear boundaries. However, like the one-to-one correlation of the *vita activa* to her tripartite sociological model, it led to some rather dubious claims. For example, Arendt concludes that slavery in the U.S. “did not make the slave-holding peoples race-conscious before the nineteenth century” and that throughout the 1700s “slave-holders themselves considered it a temporary institution and wanted to abolish it gradually” (177). This move also absolved the entire European philosophical tradition from the charge of racism, a tradition that often theorized race and freedom in ways that lent philosophical legitimacy to colonialism, racial essentialism, white supremacy, and slavery. “Until the fateful days of the ‘scramble for Africa,’” writes Arendt, “race thinking had been one of the many free opinions which, within the general framework of liberalism, argued and fought each other to win the consent of public opinion” (159). As simply one opinion among others, she argues, the race thinking of philosophers “would hardly have been able to create or, for that matter, to degenerate into racism as a *Weltanschauung* or an ideology” (158). It was only when such opinions were taken up in the service of capitalist expansion abroad that they became pernicious. Moreover, Arendt claims such racism was a reasonable reaction, given the exposure of “Western humanity” to “new and shocking experiences” (183), i.e. encountering non-Europeans through imperialism. Indeed, she writes that these experiences “necessitated the invention of racism” (184). Arendt makes a similar argument about the rise of anti-black racism (and violence) in White communities experiencing desegregation. Racism is thus simultaneously granted a logical and exceptional status in European history—functionally similar to the status Arendt grants state violence in the U.S.—and thus not something that should be considered characteristic of an intellectual tradition. Indeed, Arendt goes so far as to assert that racism was incompatible with “all Western political and moral standards of the past” (184; also Bernasconi “When the Real Crime Began”; Moruzzi 86-113; Gines 77-92).

violence.<sup>11</sup> Arendt's systematic marginalization of state and sub-state White violence leave them without justification, while the relation of such violence to racial formation—i.e. the "existential significance of violence" (Frazer and Hutchings 91) that influenced the views of Jean-Paul Sartre, Fanon, and many others in decolonial and Black Power struggles—remains undertheorized. Conversely, antiracist resistance that may involve violence is subjected to impassioned and sustained critique by Arendt and generally determined to be irrational, provocative, and—when judged by the normative standard of action and power—clearly unjustified. She even attempts to undermine the theoretical resources of New Left, decolonial, and Black Power movements by significantly (yet unpersuasively) downplaying the role of violence in Marx's and G. W. F. Hegel's understanding of revolution and social transformation (*On Violence* 11-14). This uneven treatment of violence, informed by her racialized evaluative framework and her choice of which activities to include in the *vita activa*, works to conceal and insulate the violence of the state and White rule.

### Conclusion

Arendt's critique of violence seeks to enforce the norms of the *vita activa* in the private, social, and political spheres and thus, unlike Benjamin's project, determine when and in which spheres violence by individuals is justified. None of the activities constituting the *vita activa*, however, involves the positing of law, nor can any of them provide normative support for the state violence employed in law enforcement—two central concerns for Benjamin. The laws of the political sphere, Arendt writes, "are the positively established fences which hedge in, protect, and limit the space in which freedom is... a living, political reality" ("Karl Jaspers" 81-2). This nonviolent, communicative space is supposed to enable one to engage in public affairs amongst equals and develop excellence or virtuosity (*aretē*), even when inequality, segregation, and discrimination are rampant and, according to Arendt, justified in the social sphere. As Habermas has noted, it is curious that Arendt's version of democracy "inhibits its liberating efficacy just at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins" ("Hannah Arendt's" 15).<sup>12</sup> Citing Thucydides, Arendt argues that the political must remain nonviolent, but beyond its walls "the strong did what they could, and the weak suffered what they must" (*On Revolution* 12).

From a biographical perspective, Arendt's tendency to shift the site of violence away from republican state institutions and onto these forms of dissent could be attributable in part to her first-hand experience with seeking refuge from the brutal violence of fascism. This may have contributed to Arendt's hesitation to critique the republican form of government within which she eventually found security. Her admiration for the U.S. republic and her idealized version of the American Revolution (and its revolutionaries)—which Elisabeth Young-Bruehl aptly refers to as a "political fable" (403)—are evident throughout *On Revolution*. Relatedly, Robert Bernasconi argues that "the extraordinary weight Arendt gave to maintaining the distinctness of the political was not simply a consequence of her championing of Greek ideas" but was "derived from her own experience of statelessness" ("The Double Face" 7). These were experiences not yet known to Benjamin when he penned his critique of the Weimar Republic in "Critique of Violence."

Setting aside the question of motivation, it is difficult to avoid concluding that Arendt simply held contradictory positions and that the normative content of the *vita activa* was selectively applied in order to conceal or absolve some forms of violence while denouncing others. Arendt's commitment to non-sovereign freedom (see "What is Freedom?") arguably aligned her with the voices of dissent in her time—particularly given her positive comments about council democracy (see Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's"). However, her response to antiracist and decolonial movements was either condescension or silence. This renders her critique complicit with the more reactionary political tendencies of her time and provides us with a poignant example of the ways in which a critique of violence can turn into its opposite.

<sup>11</sup> For a book-length treatment, see Katherine Gines, *Arendt and the Negro Question*. Other excellent studies include Bernasconi and Norton.

<sup>12</sup> One wonders how equality in the polis could prevent members of a community marred by social inequality and domination from viewing racialized others as deficient, dangerous, or immoral and thus never recognizing their actions as rising to the level of excellence? How can one's actions become part of history when any record or artifact of them are purged from the history books or smashed to dust? We know the heroic deeds of women and people of color—even when enjoying formal equality—are often swept into oblivion "without any more significance than slicing through a head of cabbage or than a gulp of water" (360), as Hegel would say. In their place are erected statues of rapists, slave owners, Confederate generals, and white supremacist politicians, whose only *aretē* was to enact and defend forms of racial domination and terror.

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