

The Essence of Governments

For centuries, the widespread use of violence by dictators in order to safeguard their rule has prompted debate on the relationship between power and violence. The potential of weapons to coerce and repress people can sometimes create an illusory image of general acceptance of the dictator which ultimately blurs the line between genuine support and obedience motivated by fear. German philosopher Hannah Arendt examines the sophisticated relationship between power and violence in her book *On Violence*, in which she draws a clear line between power and violence and even claims that they are completely opposite concepts. Throughout her reasoning, Arendt uses a quite unusual definition of power, defining it as “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (44). She believes that power always “belongs to a group” (44), and therefore a powerful person is in fact someone who is being “empowered by a certain number of people” (44). This definition of power allows her to identify the key differences between power and violence – specifically, that power relies on numbers whereas violence relies on implements.

While these definitions of power and violence are very helpful in proving Arendt’s main point in her essay (that is, that violence and power should not be considered synonyms), she later dismisses the crucial differences between power and violence when attempting to identify the core component of any government. Arendt conceives the government as “organized and institutionalized power” (51) and asserts that “power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not” (51). Nevertheless, when these claims are tested against real cases of revolutions it becomes clear that the core component of any repressive regime is violence rather than power. The study of revolutions is essential to understand Arendt’s theory, for revolutions aim to establish new forms of government (or at least substantially reform the old government), and it is in these initial stages of the new government after revolution that its essence is most

clearly perceived. The documentary *The Square* (Noujaim, 2013) examines the Egyptian revolution that began in 2011 amid the Arab Spring and depicts how at one point of the revolution the army gained full control after dictator Mubarak stepped down and all the protestors remained in the streets. It is indisputably true that the army was lacking the support of the people and was using its ability to act in concert not as an end in itself but rather as a means to an end. They used the “power” that emerged from gathering together with the sole purpose of implementing violence against the majority. On the other hand, the documentary *Bringing Down a Dictatorship* (Sharp, 2002), which details the successful Serbian overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 through the actions of the student organization *Otpor!*, shows the opposite reaction of the police towards the people; instead of repressing them like in the Egyptian case they decided to remain passive to their revolutionary actions, thus allowing the revolution to succeed. By choosing not to be Milosevic’s instrument of repression, they deprived him of all supports and showed how the alleged past support of the people towards him had been gained through fear and coercion. Because the basis of Milosevic’s government was violence, when the army and the police retracted their support he fell. Therefore, the two documentaries reveal how when the so-called power that according to Arendt supports all governments is used as a means to exercise violence instead of an end in itself, the essence of these governments is in fact violence and not power.

Before engaging in a deeper analysis of the two documentaries it is necessary to further highlight Arendt’s main definitions and ideas. As aforementioned, Arendt defines power as what emerges when people act in concert and asserts that power *is* an “end in itself” (51), whereas violence depends on implements rather than numbers. Based on these definitions, Arendt claims that “power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not” (51). However, this assertion is already problematic in Arendt’s own essay, for she appears to contradict herself some

pages later when she defines terror as “the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, [...] remains in full control” (55). By Arendt’s own words, we already have an example of a form of government that does not possess a basis of power. It is also important to emphasize that there is a crucial difference between recognizing that a violent government requires some people and organization in order to be able to operate and claiming that the essence of this government *is* power. When Arendt attempts to explain why the basis of a repressive regime is still power despite its brutal violence, she argues that “this superiority [that the government has through violence] lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact – that is, as long as commands are obeyed and the army or the police forces are prepared to use their weapons” (48). Nevertheless, when violent governments *use* power in order to effectively implement violence, power becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself and it no longer matches Arendt’s definition.

This last idea of the failure of the system when the army starts to disobey exactly describes what happens in the end of the Serbian revolution against Milosevic as portrayed in *Bringing Down a Dictator*. During the acts of political defiance that were carried out by the young students of *Otpor!*, the police were used by Milosevic as an instrument to maintain his ruling seat. Milosevic was not supported by the majority of the citizens; having no numbers to support him he had to rely on implements. The young members of *Otpor!* were very aware of the fact that Milosevic did not have a power basis and he was only relying on the capacity of the police to gain people’s obedience. Because he did not have the genuine support of the people he had to obtain it through the use of fear and coercion. As explained in the documentary, *Otpor!* was aiming to “target the very foundation of Milosevic's power: the ordinary people who until now have been afraid to oppose him” (00:04:03). This could only be done by gaining the sympathy of the army and thus stripping

the regime of its implements. As the leader of *Otpor!* explained, “we knew that Milosevic can resist only with the support from the police and the army, and we knew that we could affect the police and the army and make them think: should we support Milosevic?” (00:40:55). The members of *Otpor!* trained the people and tirelessly repeated to them not to attack the police. As Popovic, the leader of *Otpor!*, explains, “we had the nation trained not to attack the police and not to use violence. Our message was: there is no war between the police and us. We together are the victims of the system” (00:42:32).

Finally, after months of non-violent revolution, Milosevic lost the elections and everyone was expectant to see if he would accept the defeat or if he would use violence to preserve his ruling seat instead. *Otpor!* mobilized the people to go to the Parliament and instructed them to occupy it if necessary. The police were ordered to avoid this occupation at all costs. The documentary metaphorically depicts the moment in which both the people and police are standing in front of the Parliament – in the end, the police decide to remain passive and allow the people to occupy the Parliament. But what the police really did was abandon their role as Milosevic’s tools to implement violence - when they decided to disobey his orders they became more powerful than they had ever been before. Paradoxically as it may seem, the police were much more powerful when they *genuinely* decided to remain passive than when they were *told* to use violence. On the other hand, the occupation of the Parliament by the people illustrates a form of government that is truly based on power and not violence, because they establish a true democracy that relies on numbers and not on implements. How can the essence of Milosevic’s government be the same as that of the government that the revolutionaries establish by acting in concert? Arendt claims that when the army decides to disobey, the fate of the regime depends on “the power behind the violence” (49). But the Serbian case shows how there is no actual power behind the violence – power was being

misused and treated as a means to an end in order to effectively implement violence. One could argue that *Otpor!* was also *using* the power that emerged from their gathering together to perform actions against Milosevic. However, the fundamental reason behind their effectiveness was not the specific methods of political defiance (organizing concerts, preparing cakes for Milosevic, etc.), but rather the *sole* action of acting together. What essentially matters is that the people united with a single purpose, and not the subsequent actions that they performed together. Nevertheless, when the police acts “in concert” when exercising violence, the fundamental reason behind their effectiveness is their use of violence and not their acting together. A group of unarmed citizens can threaten a regime, but a group of unarmed police will never threaten the people. This is the crucial difference between their use of power that Arendt fails to recognize.

This same mistreatment of the concept of power is pictured in the documentary *The Square*, which shows even more clearly than the Serbian case how important it is to distinguish between acting in concert *per se* and acting in concert in order to implement violence. In the case of the Egyptian revolution, the huge number of people that gathered in Tahrir square to demand the fall of Mubarak proved that they had power, for they were all together and they were acting *in concert* – they slept in the square, they helped each other, they sang as one. As one of the characters of the documentary explains, “we were one hand. This is when we realized that people are the true power” (00:03:33). However, when Mubarak stepped down, the army seized control and established a government based on implements. The people on the streets outnumbered those in the army and had true power. Nevertheless, their power remained in the streets and was not able to materialize in the institutions of government because the army took control first. Mubarak had left empty the seat of the ruler, and it was occupied by the army rather than the people. Therefore, another government based on violence rather than power was installed, and the power of the people

in the streets was never channeled into the institutions. How could the essence of the army-controlled government be power if there was power on the streets standing against them? As demanded by the revolutionaries, “the people demand the fall of the military regime” (01:20:55) because “the people are the source of authority, not the army” (00:22:58). Arendt would argue that the essence of the military regime is power because they were organizing themselves and acting in concert. Nonetheless, similar to the Serbian case, they were using this supposed power as a way to exercise violence. They did not get together to gain power from doing so – they were getting together in order to be more effective in brutally repressing the people.

More dangerously, the Egyptian army tried to hide the fact that they were attacking their very own citizens by lying about their use of violence: “what we are witnessing now on the streets and television are just accusations attempting to smear the image of the military” (01:06:47). This denial of the use of violence by the regime that we see in the Egyptian documentary is precisely the main threat that rises when the violent essence of a government is mistakenly considered power – historically, almost all regimes that uphold themselves with the use of violence try to disguise this by pretending to have the support of the people. Therefore, the most dangerous regime is the one that uses violence to uphold itself but convinces its citizens that it is them who have chosen the status quo – that is, a dictatorship disguised in the form of a “democracy.”

The confusion between power and violence can cause fatal consequences, because the use of violence to coerce people obscures their true will. When a regime is successful in using violence to intimidate its citizens, it becomes increasingly difficult for someone to identify which of his actions are genuine and which of them are motivated by a fear of the regime. Arendt mistakes her own definition of power and sometimes equates power with organization, wrongly justifying why all governments need power. It is undeniable that in order for violence to be successful it needs to

be organized, but this does not mean that it needs a basis of power. And why do governments that have a basis of violence always try to convince the world that they have the people's support (that is, a power basis)? Because, as Arendt also points out, a power basis confers legitimacy to a government whereas violence does not. As she asserts, "violence can be justifiable, but it can never be legitimate" (52). Therefore, when Arendt asserts that all governments have an essence power, she is dangerously granting legitimacy to governments that perpetuate themselves solely through the use of violence.

In conclusion, Arendt is right in stressing the importance of distinguishing between power and violence. However, she does not consistently do so when claiming that the essence of all governments is power, which in effect dangerously legitimizes the forms of government that are based on violence. The documentaries of *The Square* and *Bringing Down a Dictator* show how when Arendt tries to justify that violent governments have a power basis because they rely on the army to act in concert, she is in fact depriving power from its natural characteristic of being an end in itself, because it merely becomes a means for violence to be effectively implemented. Rather, the essence of a government should be defined by asking: does this government rely fundamentally on numbers or on implements to uphold itself? If the answer is numbers, then the basis of this government is power; otherwise, it is violence. It is also important to notice that the fact that the two documentaries show how violence can also be the essence of certain forms of government does not diminish Arendt's theory – on the contrary, it reinforces it. Her main goal in her book is to convince us of the necessity to separate the concepts of power and violence. By recognizing that violent regimes do not have a basis of power we are pursuing the exact same goal. Otherwise, if we could not draw the line between power and violence, violent regimes could hide themselves behind an illusory support of the people that is in fact gained through coercion and violence,

thereby “legitimizing” their actions. Humankind’s free will can only be preserved as long as the line between power and violence in the essence of government is clearly drawn, and thus obedience motivated by fear never masquerades as genuine support.

Works cited

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