

**HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPT OF POWER**

**Ngoru Nixon, Researcher, New Delhi.**

**ABSTRACT**

*The term 'power' has been popularly understood in terms of violence, force, authority etc. In sharp contrast, Hannah Arendt visualizes power in the coming together of people and their acting in concert in the arena of public-political. As much as it is disassociated from terms such as violence, force, authority and strength, Arendt's notion of power is also not determined in terms of its ends. However, question remains concerning the very nature of the coming together of people. If coming together and acting in concert constitute an act itself, Arendt's understanding of power can be stretched beyond what is envisaged. This brings the Arendt's concept of power to come to terms with the significance of strategic action of the people involved.*

---

**Key words: consent, people, political, power, strategic action.**

**Introduction**

The term 'power' conveys or induces a certain sense of 'helplessness' for those who do not possess it. Consequently, power is desirable and it is worth 'keeping' it. Nevertheless, like any other concepts, power remains as 'an essentially contested concept whose meaning and criteria of application are and must remain forever unsettled' (Ball, 1988: 80). Therefore, there have been debates and disagreements primarily evolving around the questions: what constitutes as power? Where is power located? And how is it generated? Popularly, power is expressed in terms of teleological model of action and coalesces together with terms like force, domination, violence, authority etc. The instrumental understanding of power could be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, according to whom, 'power is, in sum, the ability of an agent in a relation of conflict to alter his and/or others' situation so as to promote his individual interest' (Ball, 1988: 82-83). Hobbesian notion of power has also found resonance in the contemporary time. Robert Dahl describes 'power as the subsets of relations among social units such that the behaviors of one or more units depend in some circumstances on the behavior of other units' (Dahl, 1986: 40). In similar way, C. Wright Mills asserts that 'by the powerful we mean those who are able to realize their will even if others resist it' (Mills, 1959: 9). For him, violence is the ultimate kind of power. All these definitions of power evince coercive understanding and command-obedience relationship.

This essay seeks to examine Hannah Arendt's concept of power and to underline how it is different from the aforementioned views on power. Arendt does not subscribe to the teleological view on power and attempts to disassociate power from the terms like force, authority, strength, violence etc. Power, for her, emerges when people come together and act in concert. To pursue and examine this, the essay can be divided into three sections. The first deals with the idea of 'political' in Hannah Arendt, which provides an essential background to her concept of power. Arendt's view on power is examined in the second section. Finally, the essay argues that the relevance of Arendt's concept of power can be more persuasively grounded in the understanding that instrumental purpose underlies the coming together of the people.

### The idea of the 'political' in Arendt

Hannah Arendt's idea of the 'political' is important in our discussion because her concept of power unfolds within the sphere of the 'political'. For her, it is in the realm of the political that power can be effectively realized. In formulating the idea of the political, Hannah Arendt invokes Aristotelian concept of praxis. 'Praxis' according to Aristotle meant the most human activity, the realization of which was only possible in the polis, in the human community where speech and action were not only acquired, but most significant, could be best actualized. Building on Aristotle's idea, Arendt identifies, out of all the activities necessary and present in human community, only two essential activities i.e. speech and action, are deemed to be political (Arendt, 1958: 25). She considers speech as an important activity because it is what makes a man a political being. Speech is also essentially vital for intersubjectivity: 'Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningful only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves' (Arendt 1958: 4).

Arendt traces her idea of the political to the ancient Greek understanding. The emergence of the polis heralded the emergence of the public realm i.e. the political, as against the private realm i.e. the household. In Arendt's understanding, 'Public is almost synonymous with political, but political is not to be equated with governmental; instead it concerns action in a community of peers' (Pitkin, 1981: 328). Situating political in public realm means that 'the emphasis has now shifted from action to speech, and to speech as means of persuasion rather than the specially human way of answering, talking back and measuring up to whatever happened or was done' (Arendt, 1958: 26). It follows that 'to be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence' (Arendt, 1958: 29). The polis was carried on through speech and reason, which is also a realm of freedom and equality. Activities like forcing people by violence, commanding rather than persuasion, domination are pre-political ways characterized outside the polis, in home and family life.

Arendt also precludes economic from the realm of political. The explanation is that economic concerns put men under the absolute dictates of the bodies and hence it is antithetical to freedom and capacity for action. In other words, 'economic relates to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, and hence is non-political, house affair by definition' (Arendt, 1958: 29). Moreover, economic problems are viewed as "matters of administration, to be put in the hands of the experts, rather than issues which could be settled by the twofold process of decision and persuasion" (Pitkin, 1981:334). The concern of Arendt is to establish the 'equality' of men in the political so that the only what they can 'battle' each other is through speech and persuasion and that their economic status will not influence the outcome of the battle.

Arendt's idea of the political is clearly limited to the public realm, which only permits non-coercive means like speech and persuasion. All the coercive-related actions like force, violence, domination etc. are pre-political whose suitable place is in the private realm and should never be permitted to diffuse into the public realm i.e. the political. The sanctity of the political is also maintained by fortifying it from the economic concerns. Now it is against the backdrop of the political, the realm of speech and persuasion, that she conceptualizes power.

#### Arendt's Concept of Communicative Power

Arendt's understanding of power represents a paradigm shift from the popular views on power. As it has been mentioned, the popular views tend to describe power in instrumental way and project power in term of force, violence, authority, domination etc. Here, the actualization of power is measured through the outcome. In other words, it is the end itself that constitute power i.e. teleological understanding of power. The popular views also suggest that power involves inducing some individuals to act as a means in order to fulfill the desires and interests of others. So the notion of consent or agreement based on speech and persuasion is precluded for it would amount to diminishing the possibility of usurpation of power. That is why force, violence and other coercive methods have to be inevitably and invariably employed to attain power as well as to prevent others from competing.

In sharp contrast, Arendt visualizes power from different vantage point. She debunks idea of force, violence, authority and strength from the definition of power. For her, communications between men, done through speech and persuasion corresponds to power. As she clearly states: "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is 'in power' we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name" (Arendt, 1970: 44).

#### i) The Actualization of Power

Arendt declares that power springs up wherever people come together and act in concert. The legitimacy that it derives is from the initial getting together rather than from the any action that may

follow. So according to her, the actualization of power does not need the help of force, violence etc. Rather, 'power is actualized only when word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities' (Arendt, 1958: 300). This implies that power does not in any way exist within a single individual and in the absence of the people's support.

The indispensable factor, for Arendt, in the generation of power is the living together of people. Because of the peculiarity of the power that actualize only when people come together, it is never fully materialized – power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either of numbers or means. *Ipsa Facto*, power vanishes and passes away the moment the people disperse. This establishes that 'a comparatively small but well-organized group of men can rule almost indefinitely over large and populous empires, and it is not infrequent in history that small and poor countries get the better of great and rich nations *who are not as well-organized as the former*' (Arendt, 1958: 300, emphasis added).

Arendt also maintains that instead of the institutions having overarching commanding position, which made it seemingly powerful, the effectiveness of the institutions of a country is actually because of the people's support that lends power to it. Henceforth, 'all political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them' (Arendt, 1970: 41).

The actualization of power in Arendt is possible only when people come to act together. In clear contrast to the popular view, power, according to her, could never become a reality if force and violence is used. Instead the use of coercion signals the end of power.

#### ii) The sustentation of power

If power is the outcome of the people coming together to act, what keeps the people together after this fleeting moment of action has passed? In Arendt's conception, power is an automatic result when people join together and by remaining together what they keep alive and produce is power. Not only that, it is power again that keeps the people together after the initial gathering. Hence so long as men live so close together and that potentialities of action are always present, can power remain with them. Thus, for her, 'power is boundless in a sense that it has no physical limitation in human nature rather its only limitation is the existence of other people' (Arendt, 1958: 201). However, she believes that this limitation is not accidental because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with.

The existence of plural 'human community' might introduce the interplay of powers with their checks and balances. Hannah Arendt deflates any sort of threat to power by claiming that 'power can be divided without reducing it and it is even liable to generate more and more power so long as the interplay is alive and does not result in a stalemate' (Arendt, 1958: 201). For power to exist, it has to be done only through its actualization. What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence (Arendt, 1958: 200). It cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for

emergencies. If power is lost, the impact is not limited to itself rather it would also amount to the demise of 'vibrant' political communities wherein the people act together by persuasion through speech.

According to Arendt, the extinction of political communities heralds the rise of totalitarianism. In a totalitarian state, 'the more visible government agencies are, the less power they carry, and the less is known of the existence of an institution, the more powerful it will ultimately turn out to be' (Arendt, 1967: 403). Hence power is no more 'produced' in public sphere. Instead it is relegated to the private realm in the form of secret police, concentration camps away from the 'gaze' of the public. It might seem paradoxical for Arendt to declare that power too exists in a totalitarian state where all the power concentrates in one person. However she maintains that even a totalitarian ruler need numbers, a power basis e.g. secret police and its net of informers. In totalitarian state, it is unsurprising that the existence of power in the private area effectively deters the free speech in public realm and thereby inducing the decay of the vibrant political communities.

### iii) The distinction of power from violence

After examining how power occurs through coming together of people, Arendt tries to dispel the 'consensus'<sup>i</sup> on the notion that violence is the most flagrant manifestation of power. For her, power and violence do not overlap. In contrast, they constitute two different things and that 'they are opposites: where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent' (Arendt, 1970: 56). According to Arendt, the contrast between power and violence is distinctly clear. Since the actualization of power is only possible when people 'gather' together, then it is very obvious that power stands in need of numbers. This implies that power can never be the property of an individual. Whereas Violence according to Arendt is distinguished by its instrumental character and relies on implements and eventually increase and multiply human strength. What ensues is that violence does not necessarily depend or belong to a group. The underlying principle that power harps on numbers while violence depends on implements constitutes 'one of the most obvious distinctions between and violence' (Arendt, 1970: 41-42).

To stress the point more explicit, Arendt succinctly declares that 'the extreme of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All, which is never possible without instruments' (Arendt, 1970: 42). She further asserts that 'power is the essence of all government, but violence is not' (Arendt, 1970: 51). A government which is exclusively based on power will definitely sustain while no government which is sole based on the means on violence can prolong and in fact has ever existed. To reiterate the point, Arendt views that even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument is torture has to rely on his power basis i.e. secret police and its net of informers. Also, power needs no justification since it is inherent in the very idea of political communities and it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together of people rather than from any action that might follow eventually. While Violence will never be legitimate and though it can be justifiable, as she observes, its justification becomes more remote the farther its intended end recedes into the future.

Despite declaring that power and violence are distinct phenomena, Arendt concedes that 'power and violence usually appear together' (Arendt, 1970: 52). For example, superiority of the government

manifested through violence against the violence of revolution lasts only as long as its power structure is intact. When power and violence are combined, it is the former which is the primarily and predominant factor. But she points out that in a situation, where an impotent government or a nation unused to the exercise of political power is invaded or conquered, it is not impossible for violence to overcome power.<sup>ii</sup> Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost. It is through 'acquiring the means of violence, one man can exert force against his fellow men' (Arendt, 1958: 202). Arendt declares that though violence can destroy power, it is utterly incapable of creating power. In other words, power can never be derived from its opposite i.e. violence. She argues that even if violence can destroy power, it has to create power base again to support its domination. So it is power alone which can elicit legitimacy and provide sustainability to the governments.

### **Assessment of Arendt's Conceptualization**

In conceptualizing power, Arendt enormously stresses the importance of political drawing from Aristotelian concept of praxis i.e. speaking and acting together of individuals. She, further, excludes socio-economic issues from the ambit of the political. Habermas has found this understanding of political associated with Aristotelian praxis absurdly inadequate in modern societies. According to him, Arendt's concept of communicatively generated power can become a sharp instrument only if it can be extricate from the clamps of an Aristotelian theory of action. He accordingly identifies three reasons for the absurdities of the Arendt's thought in the modern societies: i) she screens all strategic elements, as force, out of politics. ii) she removes politics from its relations to the economic and social environment in which it is embedded through the administrative system and iii) she is unable to grasp structural violence (Habermas, 1977: 14).

Habermas problematize Arendt's contention that strategic action is necessarily violent and falls outside the realm of the political. According to him, it would be naïve to exclude the element of strategic action from the concept of the political particular so when it has become intrinsic part of the working of modern societies. For Habermas, the strategic competition for political power can be less associated with force than one embedded in the unconstrained communication. This is in addition to his understanding about inbuilt structural violence in political institutions which Arendt fails to consider. Habermas conceives structural violence not in terms of force but in terms of restriction of free flow of communication indispensable for legitimation. Restricted communications render subjects susceptible to the ideological illusion. It is against the backdrop of this conception that he distinguishes between illusionary and non-illusionary convictions, the possibility doubted by Arendt. Habermas thereby locates the basis of power in the rational discourse of communicative action.

However a crucial question still remains: why should the people come together in the first place at all? Isn't the coming together of people an act itself? People might converge together with the prior aim of attaining strategic end. In this case, we can make an observation contrary to Arendt that the coming together of people and their acting in concert has a strategic purpose behind it. The purpose is to produce power in order to achieve a particular set of goals and aims. So power is not strictly an end in itself as Arendt conceives. The coming together of the people can hardly be said as constituting power

per se. On the contrary, power would be understood in term of whether strategic set of goals and aims have been achieved.

### Concluding Remarks

Hannah Arendt's concept signifies a clear reorientation in the understanding of power. Power has been understood in terms of prevailing over some individuals and inducing them to act as a means in order to fulfill the desires and interests of others. Here even an individual depending on his/her capability induce others to act according to his/her whims by intimidating with violence and force. Arendt debunks this understanding by arguing that power never exists with an individual and also 'retrieve' power from the mooring of force and violence. Instead power needs the people to come together and act in concert. She conceives power as end-in-itself such that it does not depend on the result to determine its actualization. Rather power automatically springs up whenever people act together in concert. Through this conception, Arendt attempts to escape the teleological understanding of power, which conceived power in terms of whether it has achieved success and targets. However it remains possible that the people might strategically act together in concert primarily to achieve a particular objective. Then power cannot be understood as an end in itself but in terms of whether it has achieved the intended objective. Therefore, Arendt's location of power in the people acting together in concert can be more meaningful understood in terms of strategic action while still dissociating it from force and violence.

### NOTES

---

<sup>i</sup> This is to mean the general acceptance by the popular views on power which see violence, force, domination as essential in realizing and maintaining power.

<sup>ii</sup> See the example she gives on the clash between the Russian tanks and non-violent resistance of the Czechoslovak people. Arendt, '*On Violence*' pp.52-53.

**References:**

Arendt, Hannah (1958), *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1967), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: George Allen and Urwin.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1970), *On Violence*, New York: Allen Lane the Penguin Press.

Ball, Terence (1988), *Transforming Political Discourse: Political Theory and Conceptual History*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Dahl, Robert (1986), 'Power as the Control of Behaviour' in Steven Lukes, ed. *Power*, Basil Blackwell.

Habermas, Jurgen, 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power' *Social Research*, Vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 1977), 3-24.

Mills, Wright C (1959), *The Power Elite*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Pitkin, Fenichel Hanna, 'Justice: On Relating private and Public' *Political Theory*, vol.9 no.3 (August 1981), 327-352.