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Hannah Arendt and the Paradox of Modern Revolutions: Freedom, Violence, and the Social Question

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Abstract

This article elucidates Hannah Arendt's distinctive thoughts on revolution and freedom. Revolutions are not simply about dethroning rulers, Arendt thought; they are about launching something new that has the potential to offer people the kind of unlimited freedom they wished they had already attained. She drew an important distinction between liberation and freedom. Liberation is freedom from oppression, but freedom also involves participating in public life and making decisions alongside others.

To demonstrate this discrepancy, Arendt contrasted the American and French revolutions. The American Revolution, she said, endured because it paved the way for robust political institutions like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. That endowed people with a more permanent way to practice freedom. The French Revolution went awry because it primarily sought to remedy poverty and social misery through political means. This resulted in violence, terror, and a vacuum of real political force.

Arendt also argued that violence will fail to create enduring freedom. I mean, violence can annihilate enemies, but cannot generate genuine power. For her, power arises from people coming together, talking and forming institutions. She loved the "councils" that ordinary people established during revolutions, where they could directly participate in politics. However, she lamented that such councils frequently faded away.

This essay demonstrates the importance of Arendt's thought for us today. She reminds us that freedom does not just mean releasing us from oppression; it also means empowering us to take control of our lives. It requires spaces where people can act together, speak freely, and mould a world beyond themselves. Arendt's vision challenges us to defend democracy not by rules alone, but by action.

Keywords- Hannah Arendt, Revolution, Freedom, Violence, Democracy, Liberation

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt is one of the most distinguished intellectuals of the 20th century. The most significant contribution that sets her apart is her reimagining of the concept of revolution and how it influences our understanding of political change and freedom, both from within and outside the revolution itself. She was born in Germany in 1906. She fled from the nazi regime to America due to atrocities, and that is where she wrote her famous book “On Revolution (1963)”. Her approach was distinct from others because others grounded revolution on social and economic transformation; her thought grounded it mainly on establishing political freedom.

Arendt survived some of the darkest moments in modern history. She had witnessed the rise of Hitler, lived as a refugee for many years and seen totalitarian regimes and how they crush human dignity. They influenced the way she thought about politics and freedom. Arendt saw two dominant themes in the 20th century: war and revolution. War had brought only destruction; the revolution offered hope of human liberty.

1. Arendt's Understanding of Revolution

1.1 What Makes a True Revolution

Arendt had a particular idea about what makes a true revolution. She believed that not all political changes count as revolutions. For her, a revolution must do two things: create something wholly new and establish lasting freedom (Arendt 42). This sets her apart from other thinkers who saw revolution mainly as overthrowing the old system.

According to Arendt, ancient societies underwent numerous political changes, but these were not genuine revolutions. The Greeks and Romans were aware of political upheaval, but they viewed these changes as cyclical patterns that repeated themselves. Plato wrote about how governments change from aristocracy to democracy to tyranny, but he saw this as a natural cycle, not as creating something new(Plato 405a).

Modern revolutions are different because they aim to "begin something anew." Arendt explains that the modern concept of revolution came with the American and French revolutions of the late 1700s (Himmelfarb 76). These revolutions were the first to combine the idea of freedom with the experience of starting completely fresh.

1.2. The Problem of Beginning

When revolutionaries attempt to establish a new government, they confront a challenging question: where does their authority originate? Those who make a new constitution are "unconstitutional" because they have no legal right to do what they do (Arendt 89).

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This creates what Arendt calls a "vicious circle." The people making the new government have no authority under the old system, but the new system does not exist yet to give them authority (Berlin 124). This is why many revolutions fail or turn to violence. Without legitimate authority, revolutionary leaders often resort to force to maintain control.

2. The American Revolution vs. The French Revolution

2.1. Why Did Arendt Prefer the American Model

Arendt believed the American Revolution was more successful than the French Revolution and had specific reasons for this view. The American colonists had experience with self-government through their local assemblies and town meetings (Wood 32). They had made decisions together for over 150 years before the Revolution started.

The Americans also had what Arendt termed “great good fortune.” They never had to confront the extremes of poverty and social inequality that the French did. That meant they could concentrate on building political institutions instead of tackling economic ones. The Mayflower Compact, drafted in 1620, was an early example of Americans’ appreciation of the force of reciprocal promises and agreements (Howard Zinn 15). This agreement conferred political legitimacy through the consent of the participants.

The American revolutionaries recognised that government must be confined and power divided among branches. They drafted the Constitution to place limits on any one person or group—this “checks and balances” system maintained freedom by forestalling tyranny (Madison 51).

2.2.Problems with the French Revolution

Arendt was less positive about the French Revolution. She thought it had failed because it had developed an “obsession with ‘the social question’ (Arendt 61), what to do about poverty and inequality. When revolutionaries pay too much attention to economic questions, Arendt argued, they forget about political freedom.

The French Revolution began as an attempt to achieve noble ideals of liberty and equality. However, it promptly turned violent and chaotic. Robespierre and the Jacobins thought they could employ terror to bring virtue and equality into existence. That in turn paved the way for the era of rule that became known as the Reign of Terror, in which thousands of people were put to death.

Arendt identified multiple issues with the French strategy. For one, they sought to abolish poverty politically, a goal Arendt thought impossible and perilous. Second, they contrived the notion of the will of the people being so absolutely omnipotent. The idea proved perilous because it could rationalise any action, including violence and repression (Arendt 178).

The French revolutionaries were also far too credulous about emotions like pity

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and compassion. Instead, however warming those feelings might be, she insisted they were pretty dangerous in politics. Compassion, undiscriminating and unlimited, even for the poor, could be boundless too and propose nothing but the physical extermination of those accused of being "the enemy of the people.

3. Freedom vs. Liberation

3.1. Understanding True Freedom

One of Arendt's most important distinctions is between freedom and liberation. Many people think these words mean the same thing, but Arendt saw them as very different. Liberation means freeing people from oppression or hardship. Freedom means having the ability to participate in political life and make decisions with others.

Liberation can be the first step toward freedom, but it does not automatically lead to freedom. A revolution might liberate people from a dictator or poverty, but this does not mean they will have political freedom. For true freedom to exist, institutions and spaces must exist where people can discuss and decide on public matters.

Arendt believed that freedom was not something individuals have by themselves. Instead, freedom exists in the relationships between people when they act together in public. This is why she emphasised the importance of political institutions and public spaces.

3.2.The Greek Model of Politics

Arendt frequently invoked ancient Athens as a reference point for understanding politics and freedom. She said that in ancient Greece, there was a clear division between politics on the one hand and economics and social affairs on the other. The Greek polis (or city-state) was where free citizens could meet as equals to debate public matters and make decisions accordingly.

The Greeks knew that politics was free of necessity. This is why only free citizens who did not have to work to survive could participate in politics. Though we might be troubled today by the exclusion of women and workers, Arendt marvelled at the way the Greeks kept politics distinct from economic matters.

For the Greeks, politics was not a “burden,” but a “source of public happiness as Arendt identified it as the Hippocratic dream of ‘public happiness. Huge numbers of local citizens had a good time directing and acting in this production, and by sharing the power to shape their community. Here was a happiness that was not the same as private pleasures; it was the happiness of and in freedom.

4. The Council System and Participatory Democracy

4.1. Arendt's Vision of Ideal Government

Throughout history, Arendt noticed that many revolutions spontaneously created council systems. These councils appeared during the French Revolution, the

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Russian Revolution of 1917, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and other revolutionary moments. Workers, soldiers, and citizens would organise themselves into small groups that would then send representatives to larger councils.

Arendt saw these councils as examples of true political freedom in action. They were democratic because they emerged from the people, not existing institutions. They were also federal because they connected local groups to larger networks without destroying the autonomy of each group (Pateman 84).

The council system represented what Arendt called "the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition."(Arendt 216) These spontaneous organisations showed that ordinary people could govern themselves when given the opportunity. However, these councils were usually destroyed by established political parties or bureaucratic institutions (Arendt 219).

4.2.Why Council Systems Failed

Despite their promise, council systems rarely lasted long. Arendt identified several reasons for their failure. First, established political parties viewed the councils as a threat to their power and worked to eliminate them. Second, the councils often lacked a clear institutional structure and legal protection.

Most importantly, people in modern society have lost the habit of political participation (Arendt 226). After the councils achieved their immediate goals, such as ending a war or overthrowing a dictator, most people returned to their private lives. They did not appreciate the importance of staying involved in politics. This, Arendt saw as one of the great tragedies of modern politics. The council system presented a way to leverage representative government's advantages with the citizens' direct involvement. However, without strong institutions and civic education, these experiments in freedom were doomed to fail.

.The Social Question and Its Dangers

5.1. Why Arendt Opposed Social Revolution

One of Arendt’s more interesting ideas was how she rejected what she called “the social question” in politics, by which she addressed poverty, inequality and economic hardship through politics. Arendt pointed out that solving these matters led to corrupt politics and eroded freedom (Harris 142). It was not that Arendt did not care about poverty or suffering. Instead, she thought attempting to address these problems through politics was futile. Politics, however, ceases to be about freedom and necessity when catering to people’s biological needs. The peril of the social question was that violence was brought into politics. When revolutionaries are convinced, they fight for people’s lives, and any means seem acceptable. This produces terror, dictatorship, and the elimination of the very freedom that the revolution was supposed to bring about (Arendt 114). All her ideas about social revolution can be traced back to the period in which she was.

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The American Exception

Arendt asserted that the American Revolution could be a partial truth; the reason for this is that the American Revolution separated itself from the social question. The American colonists were relatively prosperous and did not face the extreme poverty that France experienced at the time. This allowed them to focus on political questions rather than economic ones.

However, Arendt acknowledged that America had its own version of the social question in the form of slavery. She noted that it was "very strange" that the absence of the social question was "quite deceptive" because slavery represented "abject and degrading misery" in American society.

One of the American Founding Fathers' significant failings was the inability to deal with slavery. The founders chose not to address this question because they knew it would be contentious in a way that might prevent them from establishing a new government. However, that evasiveness merely delayed the eventual showdown that ultimately led to the Civil War.

Violence and Power in Revolutionary Thought

6.1. Arendt's Critique of Revolutionary Violence

Unlike many revolutionaries, Arendt was profoundly critical of violence as an instrument of political change. She differentiated power from violence, introducing the two not as analogous forces, but as opposites. Power happens when people come together willingly; violence is what people resort to when they do not have it (Arendt 274).

That contrast was significant in her critique of philosophers like Frantz Fanon, who claimed that violence could be a powerful, liberating force for oppressed peoples. The only means by which to break another group's hold on oppressed people was for the latter to overcome its sense of inferiority and establish a new system reflecting a new identity by means of violence. Arendt disapproved of this viewpoint. According to Arendt, violence never brings constructive results. If violence was required to protect oneself from attack or remove obstacles to the growth of freedom, it could not build relationships and institutions that foster freedom, allowing human beings to exist. Violence is not a talkative force; it is mute and cannot generate the communication that politics and change require or deserve.

4.3.The Problem with Means and Ends

One of Arendt's key insights was that means and ends can never be untangled in politics. Where they succeed and how they succeed in their goals makes the difference in what they ultimately mean to achieve. When you use violence to create freedom, you make a violent freedom, often, not a free one.

This was one of her foremost criticisms of the French Revolution and later communist revolutions. Even revolutions whose good intentions become impure

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in their methods when they rely on violence and terror. The very ways they came to be free ruined all possibility of freedom.

Arendt believed genuine political action required people to act together through speech and persuasion (Arendt 198). It was slow, painful and far from a glorious use of force, but it was the only possible path to establish institutions that could act as guarantors of freedom, where means are used to achieve the real end, free from impurities.

5. Natality and the Capacity for New Beginnings

7.1. The Human Condition of Birth

One of Arendt's most original concepts was that of "natality", the fact that human beings are born and are thus capable of creating new beginnings. She opposed this to the traditional philosophic push to mortality or death. Death cancels out possibilities, but birth remakes them. Natality does not mean sheer individual birth — "natality" has always been invested with a human and a nonhuman outcome for something new, or unexpected. Every human that arrives has the potential to do something that has never been done before. It is that capacity for innovation and surprise that makes politics possible. Arendt contended that the ancient Greeks did not understand politics because they had missed this power initially. Some were convinced that political change was cyclical - the same patterns repeating over time. They did not realise human activity could end these cycles and bring new possibilities.

5.2. Revolution as Natality in Action

For Arendt, modern revolutions provided the most prominent case of natality in politics. Revolutionaries were not aiming to replace one government with another; they were trying to construct something that could be entirely new. Both the American and French revolutions insisted on starting something new.

This link between revolution and natality helped to account for Arendt's mixed feelings about revolutionary politics. On the other hand, revolutions demonstrated the capacity of human beings for freedom and creativity. On the other hand, the effort to begin all over again might result in wiping out everything that has been done so far (Arend 186).

The key was finding the proper approach between the impulse for new beginnings and a reverence for the world that had already been born. Successful revolutions had to be both inventive and preserving, laying down new political institutions while conserving the conditions for freedom.

The Lost Treasure of Revolutionary Tradition

8.1. What Was Lost and Why

Arendt thought the most critical lessons of the revolutionary tradition were lost — or else misunderstood. She described this as "the lost treasure" of revolution — that politics could be a source of freedom and happiness for the people. There

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are several reasons this treasure was lost. Conversely, successful revolutions have generally succeeded by creating centralised nation-states, which concentrated power and limited citizen participation. Second, attention moved from political to social and economic freedom. Third, people lost the habit of political participation; they returned to rewarding private life with all its variety and vigour (Mansbridge 35). The loss was especially tragic because that meant that subsequent revolutionaries did not know what they were after. Instead of pursuing opportunities for political liberation, they were serious about capturing state power or wealth. This was disappointing, and it could potentially lead to tyranny.

5.3. Recovering the Revolutionary Spirit

Despite this defeat, Arendt believed it was still possible to recover the revolutionary animus. She saw it in endless 20th-century movements, from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 to the civil rights movement in America. They proved that people could still act politically and yearned for freedom.

Salvation was an affair of understanding and exposure to life. However, people needed to understand what political freedom was and why it should be valued. They must also find places to practice politics, gather with others to discuss, and make decisions on public matters..

For such recovery, Arendt believed education and institutions would be crucial resources. Without civics education, they would not understand why participating in such political activities mattered. There would not be institutions to play like that if they were not the right institutions.

6. Final note

Hannah Arendt’s concept of revolution gives us an understanding of human freedom and political change that remains striking today. In contrast to philosophers who understood revolution mainly in economic or social terms, Arendt emphasised revolution as the attempt to establish new political institutions that could house freedom.

Her understanding of the American and French revolutions expressed both the potential and jeopardy of revolutionary politics. The American Revolution succeeded, he explained, because it was driven by politics and shaped by the colonial experience of self-government. The French Revolution destroyed itself because it focused only on social issues and resorted to violence and terror.

Arendt's thought is relevant because people still fight for freedom and self-government. Her writings focus on the crucial role of political institutions, popular engagement, and the complex, three-way relationship of innovation (often disruptive), tradition and the living practice of democratic self-determination, offering lessons for all ages of democratic revival.

Above all, Arendt has also reminded us that politics at its noblest is not simply the management of political, social and economic problems, but the institution of

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the conditions in which human beings can act together as free and equal citizens. This vision of politics as a sphere of public happiness and human dignity has represented a profound contribution to political thought on her part.

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