

# Hannah Arendt on the Concept of Power

by Pat Duffy Hutcheon (1)

My first and only personal encounter with Hannah Arendt was when she came to speak to the students at Yale University in 1968 while I was studying sociology there. As always, she was questioning the conventional wisdom of the times. At that time -- at the height of the Vietnam War crisis -- she stood solidly with the student protesters. Nevertheless, during that visit she sounded a warning against the popular obsession with unlimited "sovereignty" of either the individual or the collective, and with violence as a favored vehicle for both entities in their pursuit of social change. She let us know how much she deplored the glorification of violence by many students, and their glib talk -- from privileged and protected enclaves in the Western world -- of the "necessity" for violent revolution. For this she blamed what she saw as the malevolent influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon. She felt (rightly, I now believe) that these writers and other significant opinion setters among the young were then sowing the seeds for which the whole world would one day reap the whirlwind.

I was inspired by that message to read her publications, and inspired even more as I read them. I came to the conclusion that Hannah Arendt's great contribution to social science was her clarification of key concepts -- most particularly, her insights into the nature of power in human relations. Too often this contribution has been overlooked by sociologists. This is not surprising, for the Achilles' heel of our discipline may well that in our haste to imitate the techniques of the established sciences we have been reluctant to go back to the beginning and ground our research efforts in the type of precise and universally accepted theory that makes authentic science possible at all.

I was immediately intrigued by Arendt's emphasis on the importance of maintaining meaningful distinctions among the concepts of "power", "strength", "force", "violence" and "authority" -- and on the need to employ the word "revolution" sparingly and concisely. She felt that the popular tendency to confuse all these terms "not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which could be serious enough, but it also has resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to (2)." I have had occasion many times since my first encounter with Arendt to mark how carelessness and ambiguity in the use of words both indicates and breeds fuzziness in thinking. This is dangerous in any context, but it can be downright catastrophic in a social science.

According to Arendt, the term "force" should never be used interchangeably with "power" in the study of politics. "Force" refers, instead, to movements in nature, or to other humanly uncontrollable circumstances, whereas "power" is a function of human relations. She thought that confusing these -- as with the concept of "social forces" so popular in the social sciences -- implies the operation of organic laws somehow isolated from the effects of human decisions. She maintained that "power" in social relations results from the human ability to act in concert to persuade or coerce others, while "strength" is the individual capacity to do the same. One can say that certain individuals possess the "strength" of their convictions, or that their charismatic personalities make them effective members of committees, or strong leaders. "Authority", on the other hand, is a specific source of power. It represents power vested in persons by virtue of their offices, or of their "authoritativeness" where relevant information and knowledge is concerned. It is one of the possible means by

which individuals achieve the "strength" as leaders or participants in decision-making that gives them persuasive power. Authority does not stem merely from the attributes of the individual. Its exercise depends on a willingness on the part of others to grant respect and legitimacy, rather than on one's personal ability to persuade or coerce. You will, of course, recognize Max Weber as the original source of this particular distinction. His ideas were extremely influential in Arendt's intellectual development, although they came to her indirectly -- through his friend and admirer Karl Jaspers, who served as her lifelong mentor.

Arendt considered that the term "revolution" should be reserved for identifying fundamental changes in human ways of thinking and relating. She was convinced that, in the same way that "just" wars cannot be tolerated in the modern world because of their destructive consequences for humankind and the global environment so, too, are violent revolutions no longer warrantable -- no matter how good the cause. Her fundamental objection was to the inevitable long-term desensitizing effects of violent means on the people who resort to them. It prepares such would-be leaders and followers only for totalitarianism, she said. Like John Dewey and many other naturalistic philosophers (whom, unfortunately, she seems never to have read) she recognized a continuity of means and ends. This is the insight that we are shaped irrevocably by the paths we follow in pursuit of our goals -- so much so that those goals may be forever lost to us in the ugly future determined by our chosen means. She recognized the harm that comes from a belief that humans can "know" in some absolute sense that their chosen goal is an ultimate "good"-- simply because their ideology defines it as the inevitable course of Nature or History or of God's will. She felt that this particular belief has always provided religious fanatics and violent revolutionaries with their dangerous justification for accepting evil means in the pursuit of desirable ends. The only real revolution occurring in modern times, she ventured, is that of secularism, whereby humans are slowly freeing themselves from the fears engendered by long-established -- and often violent -- mythologies.

Arendt parted company with Max Weber on the issue of violence. She was appalled by his premise that all governments -- whether democratic or not -- rest ultimately on the threat of violence against the people. Rightly, I think, she recognized this as an all-too-ready rationalization for totalitarian methods of governing. She pointed out that it is not violence but power that is the essence of government. Arendt concluded that neither Marx nor Weber really understood the difference between power and violence. Violence can destroy the old power, she said, but it can never create the authority that legitimizes the new. Violence is therefore the poorest possible basis on which to build a government. "To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished but it is also paid by the victor (3)." She considered this particularly dangerous because "The means ... of destruction now determine the end -- with the consequence that the end will be the destruction of all [legitimate] power (4)." Only terror is left!

Arendt's first book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, established her as an authority on the subject of that new form of terror-based bureaucratically centralized violence made possible by twentieth-century technology in the service of nineteenth-century ideology. In her student days she had herself been deeply immersed in some of the intellectual sources of Hitler's fantasies. In fact, her major post-graduate study originally dealt with "autonomous self-transformation": a theme central to Romantic Idealism and to the various forms of phenomenology and existentialism to which it

had given birth. She was all too aware, from her experience in German universities in the 1920s and early 1930s, of the continuing influence of Rousseau's Romanticism -- and of the growing popularity of pan-Germanism. She knew that, far from being new in the world (or even unique to Germany) Hitler's "propaganda spoke a language long familiar and never quite forgotten (5)."

It had all started, she explained, in revolutionary and Napoleonic times, as a reaction to the threatened disintegration of the nation state as a source of collective power for its members. The shared sense of common occupancy of, and responsibility for, a national territory had been gaining headway steadily since the time of Charlemagne. As well, for many centuries the perception of membership in one human race had been encouraged by the spread of universalizing philosophies. The Enlightenment, with its ideal of empowerment of the individual through the use of reason and the senses -- accompanied by joint participation in the civic society -- perhaps represented the pinnacle of this evolution away from tribalism. But, with the onset of the terrible insecurity of the early nineteenth century caused by changing national borders and political liaisons, people turned for comfort and support to the family, and to the clan or tribe. They began to revert once more to the older notion of blood ties and of mystical tribal "oneness" as the criterion for separating groups from one another -- and as the source of the only collective power that could now be relied

upon to protect them. Values were changing as well. Differences were sought and celebrated, rather than commonalities. Arendt noted that "The Enlightenment's genuine tolerance and curiosity for everything human was being replaced by a morbid lust for the exotic, abnormal and different as such (6)".

Arendt identified two poisonous roots of the tribalism that culminated in twentieth century totalitarianism: Romanticism and the race-thinking which took the form of pan-Germanic and pan-Slavic movements. She noted that both roots were nourished in France as well as in Germany. In fact, pan-Germanism as a political movement got its start with a group of alienated French noblemen who claimed an inherited superiority to the masses because of direct descentance from the Germanic conquerors of the Gallo-Roman populace in late Roman times. In mid-nineteenth century the Comte de Gobineau, enthralled with Romanticism, welded the two notions together into his historical doctrine of the "spiritual" superiority of the German race. It was a doctrine that borrowed much from Hegel, Nietzsche and Romantic Idealism in general.

Gobineau believed that he had discovered the scientific laws governing the fall of civilizations. In his opinion, they fell for one reason only: racial degeneration due to the intermixing of bloodlines. He was convinced that the original race of "princes" (the Aryans) was in danger of being submerged by inferior non-Aryan races. The greatest threat was posed by Semitic peoples -- heretofore, merely a term describing the ancient Hebrew, Ethiopian, Assyrian and Arabic linguistic groups. Gobineau put a new and ominous twist to the word, claiming the Semites were the Jewish race who had been bestialized early in human history through interbreeding with black Africans: obviously the lowest of all the sub-races in Gobineau's perverted scheme of things!

This focus on "common tribal origin", and the Romantic Idealist notions of "innate nobility" and mystical "Spirit" welding a people together was combined with Nietzsche's concept of a Superman destined to rule the world. Together, they

produced a potential volcano that was to erupt with disastrous consequences for humanity. According to Arendt, however, even this fateful conjunction of erroneous doctrines would not have been sufficient to produce the blatantly destructive form of racism employed by the Nazis. The necessary catalyst for the fatal eruption was the success of nineteenth century imperialism in exploiting aboriginal populations. She noted that imperialists would have had to invent racism as an excuse for their shameful behavior even if race-thinking had not already been rapidly gaining headway in Western culture. Dutch, British and French imperialistic feats motivated the Germans and Russians, with their late start, to invent the only form of the game still available to them. This was continental imperialism, based on the revival of the movements.

Arendt saw pan-Germanic Nazism and pan-Slavic Communism as very similar. She recognized that they had emerged from the same seedbed of Romantic Idealism and were based on almost identical pseudo-scientific theories of history. Where Nazism cited race as the defining characteristic of humanity and the driving force of history, she said, Communism substituted class. Both declared world conquest necessary and inevitable; both anticipated the formation of a new kind of human nature. She noted one obvious difference, however. Communism was originally inspired by humanitarian motives and sought international equality, while Nazism aimed at the institutionalization of a system of inherited privilege requiring the enslavement and annihilation of "inferior" races. But Arendt felt that this difference in goals grew increasingly irrelevant the more successful the movements became. She explained that the very nature of totalitarian ideology guarantees that the ends will always be overwhelmed by the dehumanizing means employed.

There was another devastating similarity. In both cases the "internal enemy" was readily available. For the Communists, property owners such as the Kulaks were "necessary victims" -- not through any dissenting acts committed by them, but simply because the theory had declared them so. In the case of Nazism, at no time in recent history had the Jews been so vulnerable and exposed in their own tribal pretensions. Arendt's explanation of why this was the case involved an original and courageous analysis of the nature of power and of leadership. A version of this same argument (when it was applied in her discussion of the Eichmann trial to the pre-war Jewish councils in Germany) subsequently aroused much criticism from the Jewish community. This was a criticism perhaps rendered more bitter by the fact of her own Jewish background.

Once again Arendt looked to European history. It happened, she said, that the threatened demise of the nation state following the Napoleonic conquests coincided with the gradual but very real demise of the inter-European role of the Jewish banker. During the state's heyday from the fourteenth to the early nineteenth century, Jewish businessmen had operated what amounted to the world's first effective international banking system. They had been encouraged to prosper while maintaining their separateness. In an era of national conflicts, Arendt claimed, their uncommitted status had suited the interests of all participants. While the laws of their host countries made social acceptance unlikely -- and any real political participation virtually impossible -- the wealthy Jews received special privileges and wielded considerable power.

In Arendt's words: "There is no doubt that the nation-state's interest in preserving the Jews as a special group and preventing their assimilation into class society coincided

with the Jewish interest in self preservation and group survival (7)." With Jewish interests as expressed by their spokesmen, that is. In Arendt's opinion, political equality in the country of their birth was simply not an issue for the Jewish leadership. They had special privilege instead -- along with considerable trans-national economic influence and the prestige accompanying it -- as well as the assurance of continued cultural separateness. The fact that a majority of their co-religionists had no political or social power in their homelands was never a major concern to these leaders.

As time passed, however, an increasingly large proportion of the Jewish community began turning from economic to intellectual pursuits, and to seeking empowerment through assimilation within their state of residence. In the process they began to lose their commitment to Judaism. Nonetheless, many of these -- like Disraeli in England -- still wanted to claim a distinction based on their Jewish ancestry. There was only one ground on which such a special status could be claimed. If it were not for the distinctiveness of their religious beliefs and rituals, she said, then it had to be along blood lines: on the basis of some form of tribal nationalism. Arendt referred to this as "race-thinking" and considered that the Jews who upheld it during the nineteenth century played into the hands of the twentieth-century anti-Semites. "Jewish origin, without religious or political connotation, became everywhere a psychological quality, was changed to 'Jewishness' and from then on could be considered only in categories of virtue or vice (8)". Whereas, in the pogroms of the past, Jews could always escape from the "crime" of Judaism through conversion to Christianity, "from Jewishness (an inherited vice) there was no escape. A crime, moreover, is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated (9)."

We come now to the pressing question of "Where were the European universities in the gathering storm?" How did they wield their very real power to affect events? Arendt concluded from her own personal experience that, whereas the universities might have been expected to operate as bastions of rational and democratic values, this did not happen. They became, instead, hotbeds of irrationalism. She claimed that they instituted a passion for the "profound", or for the "rich essence" beyond "crude appearances". They mystified and applauded anarchic power at the expense of constitutional authority. They downgraded the individual in favor of an ambiguous "Absolute Unity of Being". In the popular philosophies of the day, she said, "The particular reality of the individual person disappears against the background of a spurious reality of the general and universal; it shrinks into a negligible quantity or is submerged in the stream of dynamic movement ... and the result is a monstrous immorality of ideological politics [wherein] ... every value has vanished in a welter of pseudo-scientific immanence (10).

Arendt claimed that there is a claim common to all totalitarian movements which is almost irresistibly seductive for intellectuals. It is the claim to have restored the human being to some mystical, ego-centred "wholeness": a wholeness from which too much resort to reason and language supposedly induces a separation. She felt that this fatal vulnerability to holistic mysticism was largely responsible for the disconcerting fact that the role played by the university-educated "Afront generation" was decisive in making possible the rise of state totalitarianism during the Twenties and Thirties. She noted that, in every country in Europe, these movements were served by a roster of distinguished intellectuals and artists. She referred to "the anti-humanist, anti-liberal, anti-individualist and anti-cultural instincts of the front generation, their brilliant and witty praise of violence, power and cruelty ... They did not read Darwin", she said, "but the Marquis de Sade (11)." She blamed them more

than any other group for destroying the distinction between truth and falsehood, and the capacity for moral judgement, so necessary for civilization to flourish. They were attracted not by reasoned inquiry but by activism -- regardless of direction or predictable consequences. They applauded rebellion against respectable society no matter how cruel and perverted the form it took. Artists were particularly destructive, she claimed. People like Bertolt Brecht felt that it was revolutionary to strike a blow against hypocrisy by applauding amorality. However, in Arendt's opinion, "the only political result of Brecht's 'revolution' was to encourage everyone to openly accept the standards of the mob (12)."

Arendt concluded that totalitarian movements gain ground most rapidly where the public has taken on that peculiar combination of extreme gullibility concerning conspiracy theories and extreme cynicism about democratic institutions which is characteristic of the mob -- and where the interests of the mob and the intellectual elites happen to coincide. Beginning in the Thirties with Nazism, but continuing after the war with Communism, she said, this situation served the goal of the front organizations, which was to provide a protective cover for the movement until it could assume total power. The aim of these organizations was to duplicate all existing professional associations and then to destroy the credibility of the latter in the eyes of the general public. This ploy was particularly successful in Western universities and labor movements.

Next to the outer layer of the front organizations we find the membership of the totalitarian movement, according to Arendt. "Within the organizational framework of the movement ... the fanaticized members can be reached by neither experience nor argument; identification with the movement and total conformism seem to have destroyed the very capacity for experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death (13)." Even those attacked by the movement for no reason, such as the accused in Stalin's "treason" trials, will go to their deaths still loyal to the Party.

Arendt explained that the membership provides a protective mask for the militant groups within and they, in their turn, for the inner, elite corps with their special tool -- the secret police. In the centre, like the motor of a giant machine, is the Leader, exercising total, arbitrary control and demanding instant, unquestioning obedience. Layer upon layer, like the body of an onion: all but the deadly core operating as automatons in a monstrous, mindless and malevolent bureaucracy!

The defining characteristic of totalitarianism, according to Arendt, is the use of terror as the chief means of maintaining control. She explained that this is where such systems differ completely from mere authoritarian despotisms or typical closed institutions such as the army. All competing social and family ties must be destroyed, so "purges are conducted in such a way as to threaten with the same fate the defendant and ... all his connections (14)." Terror within a totalitarian state or organization takes the form of dominating human beings from within. Not only must one avoid expressing dissenting thoughts; merely possessing such thoughts is the ultimate crime. The spouse who overhears one's sleeping murmurs will feel compelled to inform in order to ensure personal safety -- or salvation, as the case may be.

Arendt explained that in its early stages the totalitarian regime establishes a volunteer espionage network and begins to ferret out those who have been known to oppose its ascendancy. The second stage involves the definition of the "objective" or

"necessary" enemy -- one who, according to the governing ideology, might be expected to oppose the regime. And the identification of the "possible" crime -- what that person might have planned to do. After all these are disposed of the terror becomes purely arbitrary. In the case of governments, the concentration camp plays an indispensable role in the final stage.

All this may seem old hat in the late 1990s, now that Hitler's devastating experiment and even the Cold War are but unhappy memories. But remember, this was fifty years ago that Arendt dared to say these things! Writing in the late 1940s, she was already anticipating Krushchev's revelations. In those early days she far more accurate in predicting the dark future of Communism than were most of her contemporaries, whatever their political persuasion. She also pointed out, with devastating prescience, the totalitarian potential in the then-new revolutionary government of China, which many of my fellow sociologists were still uncritically applauding at the time of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, all that she said applies compellingly to the cult formation of recent years. In tracing the evolution of totalitarianism -- and in identifying it as a universal cultural phenomenon -- she had, in fact, come up with an explanation for the abuse of power in our time that transcends geographical and political boundaries, class, tribe, religion and size of the

social group involved. Without recognizing it as such, Arendt had developed a classic sociological concept. Although the book brought her instant fame in the early 1950s, in the following decades the power and utility of her concept of totalitarianism was acknowledged by very few -- least of all by the university community. As a product and member of that community when I began to read her works some twenty-five years later, I spent a good deal of time wondering why she had exerted so little influence on academics in general.

I have come to believe that the answer lies in the very characteristic which gave Arendt her clear, objective vision of the power relations around her. It was her almost intrinsic marginality: a marginality that kept her forever at the outer limits of power, observing its workings from the outside. Her childhood was spent as an outsider -- within the marginal (albeit financially privileged) Jewish community of Koenigsberg in what was then East Prussia. Even in that close-knit group, however, she was different. Her father had died of tertiary syphilis, and the fear that she had been congenitally infected haunted the family of the sickly child and no doubt made her growing-up a lonely experience. In addition, in a community of wealthy capitalists, Hannah's young parents were socialist. And, later, within the socialist movement, her widowed mother (always an independent thinker) joined the Spartacists, the followers of Rosa Luxemburg.

From the age of fifteen Hannah followed an independent study program at the university -- so that, even there, she was not really a member of the undergraduate community. By a strange twist of fate, she found herself studying under a Christian existentialist, from whom she learned Christian theology as well as Latin and Greek. If she had not become somewhat of an outsider to her ancestral community before this, she did so then. But she was to find no haven within the broader German culture. And not ever in the university, although she made a valiant effort over an extended period. During her undergraduate years she accepted the prevailing world view of existentialism and phenomenology, as represented in the theories of Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. Nonetheless, she was still a female, and, as such, was granted little real respect in the realm of ideas. Much of Arendt's

academic experience was shaped by her mentor, Heidegger, who saw her first and foremost as a recipient of his sexual advances and, secondly, as an admiring adherent. The fact that she fell deeply in love with him made her situation no less marginal, and much more powerless. By the time she became relatively free of Heidegger and his theories, circumstances were forcing her to question the ideas of Husserl and Jaspers as well.

Her gradual awakening to the horror of the universities' complicity in the rise of Nazism made her even more of an outsider, for few of her colleagues understood her

warnings and fears. Her subsequent experience of perpetual statelessness and lifetime lack of job security -- first in France and then in the United States -- must have driven home more than ever those early feelings of marginality and powerlessness. Although she was much sought after during the late 1950s and 1960s as a visiting lecturer, she did not have a fulltime tenured position in a university until she was over sixty. She may well have chosen this course, for she believed that only the pariah in society could be fully human in the sense of not being imprisoned by the expectations and conventions of the day.

However, her experience during the early 1960s of becoming a virtual pariah to the world Jewish community was not of her choosing. Her analysis of the role of Nazi functionaries like Eichmann in the Holocaust was courageous and perceptive, but it was widely misinterpreted by Jews as "blaming the victim". It was not the first time that she had found herself playing only a marginal role in her community of origin. She had carved a lonely course in her stand on the Jewish question ever since she turned away from Zionism in the later stages of World War II. She had found herself unable to agree either with the pro-British stance of Chaim Weismann or with David Ben Gurion's plans for a Jewish state in Palestine in which Arabs would be automatically become second-class citizens. She favored an Arab-Jewish secular federation having British Commonwealth status -- in which there would be no majority or minority group.

Although it made her life difficult at times -- and no doubt limited her influence temporarily -- the perspective gained by Arendt's experience as an outsider was to become the sharpest and most effective tool in her arsenal. Never being of the in-groups wielding power in society, she could stand back and observe and judge with the relative detachment earned by a lifetime of powerlessness. Perhaps this meant that her insights were not as widely disseminated as they might otherwise have been. But how many social scientists have been so superbly endowed by the accidents of history to produce an analysis of the abuse of power that would remain as relevant a half-century later as on the day that it was written?

## NOTES

1. A paper presented by Pat Duffy Hutcheon to a conference of the Research Committee on the History of Sociology (International Sociological Association) at Amsterdam in May, 1996. For more on this subject refer to *Leaving the Cave: Evolutionary Naturalism in Social Scientific Thought* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), p. 324- 45.
2. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 43.
3. *Ibid.*, p.53.
4. *Ibid.*, p.54.
5. -----, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951). p.93-4.
6. *Ibid.*, p.68.
7. *Ibid.*, p.13.
8. *Ibid.*, p.83.
9. *Ibid.*, p.87.
10. *Ibid.*, p.249.
11. *Ibid.*, p.330.
12. *Ibid.*, p.325.
13. *Ibid.*, p.308.
14. *Ibid.* p. 323