

The Mystery of State Sponsored Violence in the Works of Hannah Ardent: Intellectual Practice as Politics

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Abstract

The interplay of terror and authority compelled Ardent to re-examine the relevance of “transitional justice” pioneered by the Nuremberg Trials. Her idea of vulnerability versus survivability underscores an unreasoned schism in responsiveness towards certain forms of violence. She grapples with the thought: how some lives are more worthy of protection while others doomed to destruction? When a homicide amounting to the murder of hundreds and thousands of innocent people is summed up as “the final solution” in the name of ethnic cleansing, she finds it hard to accept the spurious claims of the state to be the ultimate protector of peace.

Keywords: Intellectuals, Military Operations, Sovereignty, Cultural Studies, Holocaust

Introduction

A holocaust survivor and a witness of the two World Wars, Ardent’s situation gives her a vantage point from where she could comprehend more than what was visible to the general eye. She claims that advent of nuclear bombs during World War II marks unforeseen limits of violence and destruction in human history. It foreshadows an apocalyptic end of the world credited to advanced technological instruments accelerating modern warfare. The all-new horrifying face of terror with its myriad cognates manifests the grim excesses of twentieth century political scenario. These include aggressive claims to racial purity, insatiable greed for usurping other national territories, establishing religious supremacy and exerting control over thinking and action which propels a bellicose purposefulness in individuals, groups and states for deploying violence. It is this purposeful violence which Hannah Ardent implicates in her political thought.

The interplay of terror and authority compelled Ardent to re-examine the relevance of transitional justice pioneered by the Nuremberg Trials. Her idea of vulnerability versus survivability underscores an unreasoned schism in responsiveness towards certain forms of violence. She grapples with the thought: how some lives are more worthy of protection while other doomed to destruction? When a homicide amounting to the murder of hundreds and thousands of people is summed up as the final solution in the name of ethnic cleansing, she finds it hard to accept the spurious claims of the state to be the ultimate protector of peace.

The shifting paradigms of “just” and “unjust” war, military operations within and outside the state to put people in line, the detention camps, growing difficulty of tolerance, resurfacing fears inspiring people to incline towards fascism in the two largest democracies of the world are the innumerable incidences of state sponsored violence seeking intellectual intervention and reaffirm Hannah Ardent as a crucially significant thinker in coming to grips with the contemporary political and cultural dilemmas.

Main Article

Historical arguments regarding the role of what Gramsci specified as “organic intellectuals” configure among the core issues in contemporary Cultural Studies. These intellectuals would not only theorize but initiate a counter-hegemonic crusade beyond the confines of academia to shatter the orientations that challenge the legitimacy of the public space. One of the key concerns of this intellectual practice is to deconstruct the phenomena of “politics” surrounded by considerable uncertainty. The new



Monika Sethi
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Govt. Ranbir College,
Sangrur, Punjab, India

social movements and activism subsumed under such intellectual practice mark a step towards the exoneration of politics from the derogatory connotations it has acquired over time. So much so, that the expression intellectual practice as politics is quite acceptable within the recent debates signifying the role of intellectuals in creating social awakening. In the light of the above description of an intellectual and the associated activism, this project sets out to relocate Hannah Ardent's contribution towards the pedagogies that propose a different world, a better place thriving on the principles of human plurality and tolerance.

One of the most influential political theorists of twentieth century, Ardent embarks upon a lifelong confrontation with the mystery of state sponsored violence through her writings. Moreover, her allegiances to the Zionist movement before moving to the United States and later on her evident lobbying with the Vietnam War protesters and her unconditional support to the Black students' Movement during the 1960's and 70s are symptomatic of her role as both a theorist and an activist. Her exile from Germany in 1933 initiated her preoccupation with the idea of state terror. Her corpus including *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *On Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963), *On Violence* (1969), is instrumental in understanding the dialectics of violence.

Here, the concept of state and notion of enigma in relation to violence perpetuated by state entail a careful examination of both. The philosophical primacy of state as outlined by Kant and later on adopted by Hegel, invites serious contentions while discussing the limitations imposed by the ideological and repressive state apparatus. Hence, the state which once embodied the truly ethical turns out to be devouring experience in terms of the rights of citizens. The prevailing structure of states worldwide including the democratic, communist and the socialist republic defies the basic assumption of a state. It exposes the fundamental disagreement between abstract notions of a state in terms of social, legal and administrative systems committed to ensure the protection of each citizen living under its aegis and the atrocious realities of the contemporary state sustained by violation of human rights and violence. Moreover, using the word enigma or mystery in the context of state endorsed violence might strike as exaggeration of an otherwise evinced and established fact.

Human history stands as a witness to the very idea of the state emerging out of violence; whereby, clearly different provinces welded together by force, consent or coercion come to designate a specific geographical, cultural and economic sphere led by an administration based on shared beliefs. Nonetheless, the multilevel functioning of a state requires a careful investigation into its sovereignty, multitudinous, multidimensional motives and justice. The enigma could be simplified in terms of ethical responsibility, collective crime and collateral damage. Hannah Ardent meditates on the provenance of violence which acquired a rather ubiquitous and banal character during the Nazi regimes. She prioritizes the

term "Totalitarianism" over tyranny and dictatorship to describe the unprecedented crimes perpetuated by the Nazi state against Jews, gipsies and the so-called enemies of the state. Hannah Ardent's intellectual and political tradition has come to signify the site of political critique and intervention. Despite being a Jew, she stands among the pioneers to challenge the authenticity of the Zionist Movement in the state of Israel. She began as a rebel against Nazism and transcends to look at the larger implications of violence.

Ardent's distinctions between the public and the private realm have been widely challenged and remain one of the prominent issues to be validated. The world wars provided watershed moments for the western intellectuals and how they responded to the patriotic question in their respective positions as writers, teachers and leaders remain debatable. Julien Benda asserts that the foremost duty of an intellectual is to be independent of the ideologies and biases of his/her ethnic, religious or communal identity. It argues that the role of the intellectual is to critically scrutinise the actions of a community and question wherever necessary to uphold the ethics of tolerance and human plurality underscoring the very meaning of civilization.

As a true intellectual, Ardent questions the conventional wisdom of her times and advocates a broad perspective encompassing an unbiased world view. She has tried to seek to examine subtle dichotomies of the menace of violence perpetuated by the state in the garb of a peace maker and patron of humanitarian prospects. She remains susceptible to conferring sovereignty upon the institutions and deprecates the use of violence by authority for attaining social change. Her personal experiences with the holocaust have certain unavoidable bearings on her thought and the most significant reflections on the issue find place in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Totalitarianism implied a total denial of existing human values and shattered all beliefs of traditional European thinking. Ardent's *On Violence* (1970) largely deals with challenge of violence emitting from the state system. Here, the focus is on the instruments of violence, with the nuclear weapons at hand, wars are no longer means to end disputes but to end all life.

One of the primary constituents of Ardent's critique is Ideology. And, this overt form of political lying experiences the most consequential manifestations in totalitarianism. Ardent painstakingly traces the winding path that pushed anti-Semitism into an ideology supporting the Nazi propaganda. The Nazi regime fed on fear and isolation and Jews were relegated to the status of cattle, driven constantly to the ghettos and purged in oblivion. An implacable alliance between the repressive and ideological forms of the state apparatus paves way for a continuous surge of violence.

Hannah Ardent questions the legitimacy of deploying violence as a measure for state control and relevance of the counter-regimes involving the so-called enemies of the state and non-conformists to thwart this control. Here, the challenge is to analyse

the perplexities involved in waging war against “apocalyptic terrorism” characterized by unsparing suicidal intent, unwilling to make any distinctions between civilians and armed forces with a proclaimed goal of massive destruction. Ardent draws some relevant distinctions between war and revolution in *On Revolution* (1963) that could provide a foreground to the debate Ardent lays the foundations of while chewing over the incongruity between freedom and tyranny.

A detailed discussion on “Just War Theory” is incorporated to appropriate the comprehensive doctrine of common good. Hannah poses very crucial questions; what could be justifiable about war? How the non-combatant civilians could judge the legitimacy of sending forces of their country to kill and be killed? Who could decide the fate of the seized territory? How far the citizens could be absolved from the responsibility of the repercussions of war because they have consented indirectly through their chosen representatives in most cases? For a society based on the norms of human plurality, reciprocity and mutuality it becomes mandatory to weigh the obligations of ethical responsibility giving way to publicly accepted standards without compromising individual freedom for the common good.

Aim of the Study

Role of the intellectuals in altering the world to be more equitable and a just abode is one of the most engaging domains of Cultural studies. The paper renders a significant comprehension of this domain and its functionality to intervene into the present in order to remake the future. One of the major issues raised through this research paper is Hannah Ardent and her reflections on the state sponsored violence which is particularly relevant in relation to the new and emergent forms of dominance and repression. The difficulty of tolerance, danger to dissent and multiple resistance movements in India and abroad are testimony to the fact that we have learnt no lessons from history. And, enormous number of people is made vulnerable and isolated by undemocratic political and social events. Ardent’s apparent distrust over sovereign protection of the state emphasizes a relatively more reliable structure created by law and a coherent public realm. Hannah Ardent’s relevance as a critical thinker and her writings on the issues of civil liberties, state sponsored violence, personal responsibilities for atrocities, crime against humanity, international justice and culture of criminality in politics become all the more crucial for contemporary world where Stereotypical and representational religion have come to trample down the democratic values of equality and liberty.

Literature Review

Hannah Ardent remains one of the pioneering voices of the holocaust. Her stance particularly regarding the responsibility of the Jews for their tragedy might be controversial to many thinkers. But, her concepts of violence, public realm and individual responsibility have evoked considerable attention from intellectuals. In her book *Between War and Politics: International Relations and Thought of Hannah Ardent* (2007), Patricia Owens renders a

forceful case of Hannah Ardent’s persistent relevance to the understanding of terror, its perpetrators and its instruments. The book *Hannah Ardent, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (2010) by Peter Baehr examines Ardent’s idea of Totalitarianism in terms of an unprecedented evil. Apart from analyzing Ardent’s critique of social sciences, Baehr studies her philosophy in the context of Islamic terrorism and scrutinizes its possibilities to be equated with the Stalinist and social nationalist tendencies of totalitarianism. Danna Villa’s *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Ardent* (1999) reiterates Ardent’s contribution in intensifying our understanding of political evil in the contemporary world. *Hannah Ardent: A Recovery of the Public World (1979)* is an engaging collection of essays edited by Melvyn A. Hill. These reflections in the book configure a critical appraisal of Ardent’s political theory and establish her as one of the most influential thinkers of twentieth century. Chad Kautzer in *Political Violence and Race: A Critique of Hannah Ardent* (2019) draws a distinction between power and violence and argues that the latter must be excluded from the political sphere. The texts mentioned above evaluate Ardent’s political and philosophical thought and adequately contextualize her writings, reinforcing her relevance in the contemporary world but do not take up the question of state ideology or the role of public intellectual.

Research Methodology

The research paper tries to delve into the conflicts encompassing the role of intellectuals in both the academy and in politics. It involves mapping of the concepts and paradigms formulating Gramsci’s “organic intellectual”. Hannah Ardent’s abiding involvement with the socio-political issues has come to signify her political activism stemming from her intellectual response. In order to bring out Ardent’s socio-political issues particularly pertaining to the Nazi violence I would refer to Julien Benda’s *The Treason of the Intellectuals* where the central concern is the role of the intellectuals in generating counter-hegemony. Ardent claims that the Nazi regime thrived on propaganda and a fabricated world view. Through the contemporary debates concerning the post truth politics, I have tried to study the conduits of force and coercion manipulated by the institutions of the state. In order to study the varying patterns of political violence explored by Ardent; critical insights will be incorporated from the theory of totalitarianism in the context of Althusser’s concept of ideology and the functioning of state machinery. While distinguishing between the “just” and “unjust” war, one confronts a profound question whether we could truly justify war. Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) and *Arguing about War* (2004) are significant to the fundamentals of the aspirations of citizens and requirements of justice in relation to war. Ardent’s substantive work on violence and war articulate her distaste for the idea of “justifying” or “humanizing” war.

Conclusion

The research project endeavours to enhance the comprehension of state sponsored violence as a

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ubiquitous and precarious political concern transcending boundaries of the occidental and oriental. Manifestations of uncertainty reflecting inherently transitional dimensions engender the legitimacy crisis of the nation state. Re-emergence of nationalism in terms of the reassertion of identity has led to political manipulation and mobilization resulting in rampant violence. The confessions of the prisoners of Guantanamo, the plight of refugees, a near civil-war condition in India, and the latest electoral outcome of the American Democracy are but a few instances of the loss of meaning which could be countered by political discourses that visualize coherence and stability in active citizenship secured by the public realm.

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