

# The concepts of power and violence in Hannah Arendt: an analysis from the point of view of communication\*

Los conceptos de poder y violencia en Hannah Arendt:  
un análisis desde la comunicación

*Os conceitos de poder e violência em Hannah Arendt:  
uma análise a partir da comunicação*

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## Abstract

The article provides a reflection on Hannah Arendt's concepts of power and violence, analyzed from a communicative perspective. Throughout the document, power, defined as a possibility, is grounded on that dimension of human beings existing only when social relations exist. To that effect, we argue in favor of a definition of power as generating in the interaction between communicating subjects, and namely, in being together the ones with the others, in seeing and hearing each other.

**Keywords:** Power, Violence, Action, Politics, Communication.

## Resumen

El artículo ofrece una reflexión sobre los conceptos de poder y violencia propuestos por Hannah Arendt, analizados desde una perspectiva comunicativa. El poder definido como posibilidad se sustenta a lo largo del documento como aquella dimensión de los seres humanos que existe siempre y cuando existan las relaciones sociales. Para ello se sustenta la tesis que define al poder como aquello que se genera en la interacción de los sujetos comunicantes, es decir, entre los sujetos, en el estar juntos los unos con los otros, al ser vistos y oídos entre sí.

**Palabras clave:** Poder, Violencia, Acción, Política, Comunicación.

## Resumo

O artigo apresenta uma reflexão sobre os conceitos de poder e violência propostos por Hannah Arendt, analisados a partir de uma perspectiva comunicativa. O poder definido como uma possibilidade é sustentada ao longo do texto como a dimensão de seres humanos que existe sempre e quando existam as relações sociais. Para isso, se sustenta a tese que o poder é definido como aquilo que é gerado na interação dos sujeitos comunicantes, ou seja, entre os sujeitos, no estar junto uns com os outros, ao serem vistos e escutados entre si.

**Palavras-chave:** Poder, Violência, Ação, Política e Comunicação.

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## 1. Introduction

Writing about power in Hannah Arendt, forces politics to be thought of as a possibility of a plural sphere in which those who participate reveal themselves as someone<sup>1</sup>. “Politics are based on the fact of the plurality of men” (Arendt, 1997, p.45). As Arendt asserts in the first pages of his text *The Human Condition* (1958), what this document proposes “is nothing more than thinking about what we do” (p.18), that is, thinking about human activities since their own experience. Power is one of them.

Arendt conceives of power, as that which arises when subjects come together to act and dialogue in concert. This is the starting point of this article. Therefore, power is given out of the subject, not within it; in this sense the subject is apolitical (Arendt, 1997, p.46), that is to say politics are born in him between subjects and therefore completely outside the subject.

From there, we see a method based on the art of defining concepts, an art of the distinction that she attributed to Aristotle and in which the exercise of thinking for the author consists in a good measure. To think is to distinguish, to capture the specificity of concepts, of the experiences in which they take root: imperialism-totalitarianism, labor-work-action, private-public, social-political, think-know, thought-will-judgment,

are some of those who are being polished in these pages (Fuster, 2013, pp.145-146).

The document is built on the idea worked by Arendt in the essay *About violence*, in which political action is defined as a related action, in that sense, with power as the possibility of concerting and sustaining actions. “In contrast, violence always negates the possibility of new actions” (Loyola, 2011, p.29). In this way, violence cannot generate political power, given its instrumental nature. Consistent with this, for Arendt, power is not identified with violent coercion, but rather with the human capacity for concerted action. This article seeks to demonstrate that violence as an act of instrumental nature, imposed under a dynamic means-end, is totally opposed to the Arendtian conception of power.

The article addresses the concept of defined power as opposed to the concept of violence. For this, three stages of the concept of power are offered. In the first place, a definition of power is outlined as a concept associated with the categories of action and policy proposed by Arendt in his text *The Human Condition*. Secondly, the public sphere is described as the physical / symbolic space in which Arendt’s power is configured. Ultimately, the article defines the communicative (non-instrumental) possibility of subjects as the main way of living power by human beings.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Power as a Political Possibility (action) of Subjects

Power emerges in between and is established as relationship. It exists only to the extent that there are relationships between subjects. For Arendt the power is different from potency, strength, authority and violence, concepts used in common speech indiscriminately. "To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but also has resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities to which they correspond" (Arendt, 1969, p.146). In the same order, if the political question only comes down to who sends whom? Then the concepts enunciated in the quotation would be no more than words to indicate the means by which man dominates man.

However, for Arendt, power is not synonymous with domination. "Only after the cessation of the reduction of public affairs to the subject of dominion will the original data on human affairs reappear in their true diversity" (Arendt, 1969, p.146). For example, power corresponds to an individual, is singular, individual, is inherent property of an object or person and belongs to his character, which can demonstrate itself in relation to other things or with other people, but is essentially independent of they.

It is not the private sphere that will serve as the conceptual basis for Arendt's concept of power. For example, authority exists among people through some relationships as father-son, teacher-student, in hierarchical entities of the Church; its characteristic is the indisputable recognition by those who are asked to obey and for this it does not need neither coercion nor persuasion. This type of relationship requires the establishment of a previous hierarchy. Contrary to this, "The subject acts only in the public space conceived as a space of appearance, insofar as he dares to present himself to others, when it is able to restart new projects in community through works and speeches" (Navarro, 2014, p.25).

Violence, on the other hand, has an instrumental character, that is, violence is never possible without instruments (Arendt, 1969, p.147), which is equivalent to thinking that he needs a guide and a justification to achieve the end he pursues. However, it is very common to combine this concept with violence and power and less frequent the pure understanding of the concept of power. This combination occurs when power is conceived in terms of command and obedience from where it is tempting to equate it with violence. In this sense, the Arendtian power, nor is defined from the number of people under the command. Arendt describes it clearly in the following quote:

Power does not need justification, being as it is inherent in the true existence of political communities; what it needs is legitimacy. Power emerges where people come together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial meeting rather than from any action that can follow it (1969, p.154).

In political terms, the loss of power becomes a temptation to replace power by violence. To account for the action, Arendt establishes a contrast between this and the other dimensions of the human condition, labor and work. In connection with the previous paragraph, it is possible to say that freedom is understood as a non-submission to the coercion of no other, nor as an employee, nor under the necessity of earning daily bread. As in the Greeks, man must be free from the obligations necessary to live. So far it is possible to put forward a first concrete and central idea for the interests of this article: Power is not associated with coercion or violence, nor is it based on the absolute domination that one subject can exert over another.

The political in this sense Greek is therefore focused on freedom, understood negatively as not being dominated and not dominated, and positively as a single space established by many, in which each one moves between equals. Without such others, who are my equals, there is no freedom. That is why

the one who dominates over others and is, therefore, different principle of it, may be happier and envy than those he dominates but no freer (Arendt, 1997, p.70).

Fina Birulés says that Arendt understands work as the dimension linked to necessity, to the cycle of repetition of nature, to the production of everything necessary to keep alive the human organism and the species. The work is related to production and consumption. “In this way, labor and consumption are only two stages of the ever repetitive cycle of biological life” (Birulés, 1997, p.16). This means that labor does not represent a political component of the human condition. Each member of the working group has no recognition, and it is for this reason that in this dimension of human activity, identity is confused with uniformity.

On the other hand, unlike labor, work is productive: its results are destined not so much to be consumed as to be used: they have a certain durable character. “Work constitutes the dimension through which we produce the pure inexhaustible variety of things that constitute the world in which we live, the human artifice” (Birulés 1997, p.17). This process is characterized by being objective, instrumental, half-fin, stable, durable and artificial. Work is done to manufacture and to use.

Contrary to labor and work, the action is

distinguished by its constituent freedom, by its unpredictable nature. For Arendt, the meaning of politics is freedom (Arendt, 1997, p.62), that is, it is an inescapable necessity for human life, both individual and social. “For Hannah Arendt politics is action, but action is not any behavior. *Vita activa*, Latin expression that translates *bios politikos* of Aristotle, is the kingdom of the freedom, is the space in which the human beings can be free” (Giannareas, 2011, p.100). From this perspective, the man is not autarchic, but depends on their existence of others: without it, coexistence would be impossible. “It is thanks to action and to the word that the world is revealed as a habitable space, a space in which life in its non-biological sense (*bios*) is possible” (Birulés 1997, p.18). This dimension of the human condition is articulated only through language, in a concrete way, through deliberation and dialogue.

It seems obvious that Arendt takes up and expands *About violence* a thesis that had already been announced in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The perpetration of violence in politics openly attacks the spontaneity of human action. This formulation is made possible through the distinction between violence and power. While the first term responds to the human need to annul the *spontaneity* of the actions of human beings, the latter refers to the human capacity to act in concert, that is, it is that which allows

the spontaneous creation of new frames of events through actions (Loyola, 2011, p.40).

Hence, it is not necessary to consider who acts as a pre-existent individual, sovereign and autonomous; rather, the subject is classified as given in the world reason; likewise, freedom is understood as a characteristic of human existence in the world, that is, human beings are free as they act, never before or after, because to be free and to act is one and the same things.

We cannot but think that action and discourse need others, and it is not worth arguing by force to bring action to subjects, since action has to be said, as an enterprise in two ways: Initiative by an individual and the completion of the same by others; that is, action always begins or begins from the volitional determination of a subject who reveals it to others and these will be precisely the ones that will end ... (Uribe, 1997, p.40).

From the above quotation it is inferred that the action in Arendt is cooperative among the actors of the political community, given in it, that is, revealed in it as distinct and unique subjects between equals. In the context of action, others are necessarily present. Hence, use the birth rate to account for this dimension. Political action, Arendt thinks, “as any other type of action is always essentially the beginning of something new” (Arendt, 1995, p.43).

Politics is synonymous with human interest in action; action is politics itself, it is power in itself; however, action is only political if it is accompanied by the word (Lexis), of discourse, that is, to the extent that the latter makes praxis meaningful. "And this because, insofar as we always perceive the world from the different position we occupy in it, we can only experience it as a world in speech. Only by speaking is it possible to understand, from all positions, what the world really is" (Birulés, 1997, pp.18-19).

In this sense, the human being is above all action. The totalitarian, make the dependent man, takes away their autonomy and their possibility to think. It is like an iron rod that compresses people more and more until it becomes one person (Arendt, 1951, p.466). Completely contrary to this, the capacity to act is the source of power. It distinguishes three types of power: political (actions that change the world, the public sphere), apolitical (domination), and antipolitical (alienation from the world, totalitarianism, blind violence ...). "Only absolute violence is mute" (Arendt, 1958, p.26). Arendt will take the idea of power from a conception of action, as an ability to agree with and act on others. Power appears among men when they act together and disappears when they disintegrate, when someone imposes itself. Arendt criticizes the disappearance of public space in

the modern world and with it the elimination of the necessary condition for action and freedom.

In his text *What is politics?* Arendt states that man is apolitical. Politics is born among men, therefore completely out of it (1997, p.46). This means that political action exists with respect to others and that is how power is given. In this sense it has to do with the lived, the particular, the endowed with meaning, with the sensible world, with the ways of letting ourselves be seen and heard in front of the others, where we cannot avoid appearing. Now, to appear is to reveal itself. Therefore, power is possibility, possibility of doing things for collective purposes and is characterized by plurality, not proposed from transcendentalism, or unification or reductionism to a universal history, but from contingency, singularity and individuality (as power).

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and discourse, has the dual character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could not understand, nor plan and foresee for the future the needs of those who will come later. If men were not different, that is, each human being differentiated from any other that exists, they would not need the discourse or the action to be understood (1958, p.200).

## 2.2. Power as a Possibility to Communicate

From the above it is inferred that discourse and action reveal the possibility of being different from human beings. Through them, subjects are differentiated rather than merely distinct; “Are the ways in which human beings present themselves to each other, not as physical objects, but as men (SIC)” (Arendt, 1958, p.200). In this sense it is possible to conceive the Arendt power as communication. With word and act there is insertion into the human world; in this insertion does not operate the necessity as it happens in the work; nor the utility as in the case of work. What happens with labor is that it is an activity in which man is not together with the world or with others, but only with his body, facing the naked need to stay alive.

In the work there is no recognition of the other. For Arendt the *animal laboran* is incapable of distinguishing, it is incapable of action and discourse, which seems to be confirmed by the surprising non-existence of slave revolts in ancient and modern times. It is, after all, the communication between subjects, in the public domain, the basis of politics and humanity. The public sphere is the space where freedom can appear. “It is not a space in any topographic or institutional sense: a municipality or a city square where people do not act in concert, it is not a public space in this Arendtian sense” (Benhabid, 1993, p.32). This means that a pri-

vate dining room in which people gather to listen or in which dissent, different pluralities, can become a public space.

In coherence with the above, the public spheres are such to the extent that they become places of power, which implies spaces for the appearance of coordinated actions through language, persuasion, the word. “Acting, in its most general sense, means taking an initiative, starting (as the Greek word *archein* indicates, beginning, leading and finally governing), putting something in motion” (Arendt, 1958, p.201). The unexpected is expected of every newborn. “To be born is to enter into a world that already existed before, to be born is to appear, to become visible, for the first time, before others; to become part of a common world” (Birulés, 1997, p.18). The fact that man is capable of action means that one can expect from him the unexpected, to realize what is infinitely improbable. And once again this is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something singularly new enters the world.

If the action as a beginning corresponds to the fact of being born, if it is the realization of the human condition of birth, then discourse corresponds to the fact of distinction and is the realization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being between equals (Arendt, 1958, p.202).

Every action is inherent in a discourse. There is no action without speech, that is, without subject; Arendt places the plane of action on the plane of the human, in the plane of words, not in the plane of robots; action cannot take place in isolation, because whoever starts something can only end it when he gets others to help him. The principle of isolation is fear. "Fear is linked to the anguish that is tested in isolation, that is, the reverse of equality" (Amiel, 2000, p.41). Thus, fear is the manifestation of anti-politics. Contrary to this, it is through the word how the subject identifies himself as a social actor, announcing what he does, what he has done and what he intends to do; all this is possible in the public sphere. In war there is no action, no recognition, no power. In it, the speech is just another talk; the word a simple means-instrument to achieve an end, either to deceive the enemy or to dazzle it. In this way there is no subject, there is no who, only what or what for. It loses the identity of the people.

Action without a name, a *who* attached to it, has no meaning. The monuments to the soldiers fallen in the Colombian war, the need to bury the remains of their children kidnapped, killed and disappeared from the war, respond to the search for a who, an identifiable, someone who had revealed the years of war.

The frustration of this desire and the reluc-

tance to resign themselves to the brutal fact that the agent of war was really nobody, inspired the erection of monuments to the unknown, to all those whom the war had not made known, stealing not their realization, but its human dignity (Arendt, 1958, p.205).

This approach relates the Arendtian thesis that action, unlike fabrication, is never possible in isolation; being isolated is the same as lacking the capacity to act. The Arendtian subject is revealed to the other through action and speech, insofar as it is through these means that man presents himself as different. "Revealing action needs peers and spectators, and this is what makes Arendt say that theater is the most political art" (Amiel, 2000, p.68). Action and speech need the presence of others no less than the manufacture requires the presence of nature for its material and of a world in which to place the finished product. "Manufacturing is surrounded and in constant contact with the world; the action and the discourse are with the plot of the acts and words of other men" (Arendt, 1958, pp.211-212).

All this occurs in the scenario of the *polis*, not defined as city-state in their physical situation; rather it is the organization of people as they arise from acting and talking together; it is the communicative and political dimension of human beings. Its true space extends among people living together for this purpose, no



matter where they are. In the *polis*, action and discourse can find a space between the participants in every time and place. “It is the space of appearance in the broadest sense of the word, that is, the space where I appear before others as others appear before me, where men do not exist merely as other living or inanimate things, but make their appearance explicitly” (Arendt, 1958, p.221). It is here from where it is possible to contextualize Arendt’s understanding of power.

### ***2.3. Power is Configured in the Arendtian Public Sphere***

The public sphere is the political stage where subjects become equal, but not identical. Only the political act can generate equality, insofar as it allows subjects to speak and act. In this sense, the narrative would identify the subject by telling his own actions. Human beings are not substance, they are not essence, they cannot be defined, but they can be related, and to relate is to give meaning to the heterogeneous but unified. In this thesis communication is important as a political element that defines human beings. Communication is the public power of subjects, which is configured whenever they are grouped through discourse and action in the public sphere.

And it is precisely in the word, in human relations where power is built. On the contrary, violence is based on instruments, artifacts; It

can always destroy power. In this regard, Arendt asserts that “from the barrel of a weapon sprout the most effective orders that determine the most instantaneous and perfect obedience. What can never spring from it is power” (Arendt, 1969, p.155). In this way, power is not stored, cannot be reserved to deal with emergencies, as the instruments of violence, but only exists in its reality, through the power of the word. Arendt clearly states it in the following way:

Power is only reality where word and act have not separated, where words are not empty and facts are not brutal, where words are not used to guard intentions but to discover realities, and acts are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relationships and create new realities (Arendt, 1958, p.223).

In this sense, power is what maintains the existence of the public sphere, potential space of appearance between the subjects that act and speak. It does not translate in this context as a force. To conceive this way, it will be necessary to think of an isolated subject; in a contrary way, it arises between the subjects when they act together and disappears when they are dispersed. Therefore, power is independent of the material, of any accumulable instrumental factor usable in violent acts although violence

is capable of destroying it can never become its surrogate.

Arendt was clear that totalitarian movements appeared in a non-totalitarian world, which were articulated from elements present in such a world, and that, therefore, the process of their understanding involved, to a great extent, a process of self-understanding that challenged Western culture. He was keen to show that totalitarian regimes emerged in societies where the political sphere and the human capacities were already weakened from which individuals gave life to it. One of the main pre-totalitarian conditions resides in the destruction of the public sphere through the dynamics of producing isolation and political detachment from individuals (Figueroa, 2014, p.132).

Hence Arendt asserts the non-infrequent combination politics of strength and lack of power. In the figure of the tyrant power is synonymous with strength and strategy, displacing the public, the word, the action to the terrain of the antipolitical. The German thinker turns to the thought of Montesquieu to exemplify this position in tyranny. According to Montesquieu the outstanding characteristic of tyranny was that it was based on the isolation, the tyrant with respect to its subjects and these among each other due to mutual fear and suspicion. This leads to the contradiction of the

essential human condition of plurality, acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization.

Tyranny prevents development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public sphere but in its entirety; said in other words, generates impotence as naturally as other political bodies generate power ... only tyranny is unable to develop enough power to remain in the space of appearance in the public sphere (Arendt, 1958, pp.225-226).

This is why Arendt asserts that “the only indispensable material factor for the generation of power is the united living of the people” (1958, p.224). The isolated subject, not united to the others, who does not participate, suffers the loss of power and remains impotent, however great his force and very valid his reasons. In his 1969 text, *The Crisis of the Republic*, Arendt refers directly to his concept and states it as follows:

Power corresponds to human capacity, not simply to act, but to act in concert. Power is never owned by an individual; belongs to a group and continues to exist as long as the group remains united. When we say of someone in power we really mean that he has a power of a certain number of people to act on his behalf. At the moment when the group, from which power has originat-

ed (*potestas in populo*, without a people or a group there is no power), disappears, its power also disappears (SIC) (p.146).

In this order of ideas it is valid to affirm that power is unlimited, that is to say, it lacks physical limitation in human nature, in the corporeal existence of man, as a force. Its only limitation is the existence of other persons, understood as plural persons. "Power is conceived by the author as the human capacity to act in concert, it only appears where men meet for the purpose of doing something in common" (Figueroa, 2014, p.134). Thinking about omnipotence involves the destruction of plurality. This is not, therefore, merely otherness, but it does not equal the mere political pluralism of representative democracies.

It is rather the possibility of being seen and heard, the possibility of being visible in differences; plurality does not imply fusion, so Arendt attacks against any attempt to construct political bodies on the model of kinship or family, away from neighborhoods and fraternities, because in them the various become one. "The indispensable condition of politics is the irreducible plurality that is expressed in the fact that we are somebody and not something" (Birulés, 1997, p.21). Hence, the attempt to suppress plurality is equivalent to the abolition of the public sphere itself (Arendt, 1958, p.241).

This is equivalent to the citizens losing their space of participation in common affairs, to strengthen the industriousness and private industry and that only the ruler becomes a figure that involves competences of the private sector in the strictest sense. "The short-term advantages of tyranny, ie stability, security and productivity, pave the way for the inevitable loss of power, even if the actual disaster occurs in the relatively distant future" (Arendt, 1958, p.242).

### 3. Conclusions

To conclude some final reflections that try to gather the most important ideas supported in this article:

1. Arendt develops a critique against that anti-political idea for the thinker that men can only live together legally and politically when some have the right to rule and others are forced to obey. Consistent with this, it challenges the conception that every political community is made up of those who govern and those who are governed, on which the current definitions of forms of government, monarchy (government of one), oligarchy (government of few) and democracy (government of many).
2. From Arendt it is possible to conclude that power and violence are opposites; where one dominates absolutely the other is lacking. "Violence appears where power is in danger but, entrusted to its own im-

pulse, ends up causing power to disappear” (Arendt, 1969, p.158). To speak of a non-violent power is actually a redundancy. It can be concluded that power is the possibility of communicating among others through dialogue, dissertation and debate.

3. For Arendt politics is human experience, social interaction embodied in the sphere of power or public sphere or better sphere of freedom and plurality. It develops all possible relations of communication.
4. Violence is absolutely incapable of creating power, that is, power is not born, it is not derived from violence, from its opposite. “Only power generates power” (Arendt, 1969, p.146), which means that power depends on nothing but itself. Totalitarianism, authoritarianism and any hierarchical way of conceiving relationships are social is equivalent in this context to nullify the possibility of power and therefore of communication.

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