

Silke LECHNER

The Fruit of Cooperation

– An Unusual Concept of Power

Ever heard of ushay? Recently, I came across a very fascinating concept of power in a language basically unknown to me. In the language of the biggest group of indigenous people of Ecuador, Quechua, power is translated as ushay. Ushay means improving living conditions; it refers to the capacity to develop collectively¹. Power is thus understood as the fruit of cooperation. Certainly a rather unusual understanding of the term.

Definition of Power

How do we define *power*? Although at first sight it seems a clear concept, it is actually not that easy to define power when thinking about it more carefully. If we had to come up with related words as a first step to a definition, we would possibly come up with words like: *authority, control, strength, might, domination*. If we would then try to provide a definition we might say something like: “Power is the ability to exercise control over other people”. Essentially this is the definition used by most philosophers and theorists, ranging from VOLTAIRE to WEBER.

We think of power as something happening between people, power is relational and is often defined as the ability of one person to impose her or his will on another. Political theorist Robert A. DAHL understands power in exactly this way: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”²

Power, thus conceptualised, has to do with force, it is something happening in the interest of one and against the will of another. In this concept, it is something that is attached to individuals, and, defined like this, it is clearly possible to pin down who has power and who has not. A does have power, B does not. While A is *power-full*, B is *power-less*. This definition implies a very negative view of power; power is something to be afraid of. If A has the power to make you do something you do not want to, then A is to be feared. Power is something in the hands of some people and not of others.

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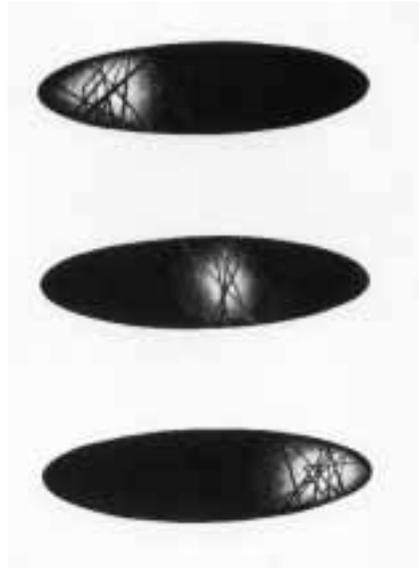
¹ KINTO LUCAS, *We will not Dance on our Grandparents' Tombs – Indigenous Uprising in Ecuador*. London, 2000.

² Quoted in MARSH David – STOKER Gerry (eds.), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. Basingstoke, 1995. 213.

ARENDR'S Concept of Power

However, although this might be the prevalent understanding of power, it is certainly not the only way to conceptualise power. Hannah ARENDT³, described by Margaret CANOVAN as “one of the great outsiders of twentieth-century political thought, at once strikingly original and disturbingly unorthodox,”⁴ provides a radically different and refreshing concept of the meaning of *power*.

In contrast to the definition above, ARENDT does not conceive of power as something that could ever be the property of an individual. It is something detached from individual beings; it cannot even be possessed by adding up the strength of a group of individuals. Instead, “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it



³ Hannah ARENDT (1906-1975), political theorist, born in Hanover, Germany. Grows up in Königsberg, is raised in a Jewish-assimilated family. Studies philosophy and theology, among her teachers are HEIDEGGER, HUSSERL and JASPERS. In the year the Nazis came to power, in 1933, she flees to Paris. In 1941 she is interned in a camp in France, after a couple of weeks she manages to escape to the USA. Living in New York she wrote her most prominent book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Other works include *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963), *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The first woman to become a full professor (of politics) at Princeton University, she subsequently taught at the University of Chicago, Wesleyan University, and finally the New School for Social Research.

⁴ CANOVAN Margaret, *Hannah Arendt – A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge, 1992. 1.

belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”⁵

ARENDT believes that if people join together for some common political purpose, they can develop a potency that is disproportionate to the individual resources of the gathered people. As example for her conceptualisation she refers to GANDHI’s movement in India and the successful challenge this group of people mounted to the political order.

Fair enough, we have seen different examples of powerful peoples’ movements in recent history. In my country, a peaceful revolution happened in 1989, effectively tearing down the wall that had divided Germany. It is a powerful example of how non-violent protest by a large number of people can actually generate a change of a repressive political regime. Indeed, in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe human beings have demonstrated the capacity to act in concert, to jointly generate the power to overturn established institutions and to free themselves from communist rule. The *Solidarity Movement* in Poland and the independence movements in the Baltic states are just two other examples.

Where People’s Power Failed

However, can only this form of political action be considered as *power*? Looking at our world, we can see that in most places it is actually not the majority of people ruling, it is not the so-called powerless who shape politics and society and often peoples’ movements actually fail despite them acting in concert. Let us take the example of student protests in Mexico. On October 2, 1968, in the *Tlatelolco Massacre*, the government in a public square in Mexico suddenly killed hundreds of unarmed students. Protests against the government had started on occasion of the Olympic Games, students took advantage of the international attention during the Games to demand democratic reforms and social justice—15,000 students marched throughout the streets of Mexico City. By the evening, 5,000 students and workers entered the Plaza de Tlatelolco. That peaceful student demonstration was suddenly drowned in blood. Although accurate figures are still unavailable, it is estimated that more than 300 people were killed, hundreds were injured and several thousand were arrested.

Similarly, peaceful protest was stopped by force in China in the 1980s: In May 1989, students began to occupy *Tiananmen Square* protesting for democracy and human rights. On June 3, the government ordered Chinese troops to clear the students out of the square, resulting in the massacre in which an estimated 5,000 citizens were killed. Thus, despite a very large number of people – at times an estimated million or more people participated in the protests – acting in concert, people power failed. Another example of failed people’s uprising is the Magyar Revolution of 1956. The popular overthrow of the Communist regime was almost instantly reversed by the forceful invasion of Soviet troops.

So, who had the power here? Certainly the Mexican, Chinese and Soviet rulers.

⁵ ARENDT Hannah, *On Violence*. London, 1970. 45.

Power and Violence are Opposites

ARENDT would question this—not, however, because she ignored political realities, nor because she had some romanticised view of social and political relations of humanity. On the contrary, her concept is just different. She put great emphasis on distinguishing between *power* on the one hand and *violence* on the other. Violence, as she understands it, is coercion. It means imposing one's will upon others. Thus, this definition of violence comes pretty close to our original definition of *power*, and it becomes obvious how much we often see these two, *power* and *violence*, as belonging together. ARENDT, in contrast, argues that the two are opposites. "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent... To speak of non-violent power is actually redundant."⁶

Reading about this understanding of ARENDT, I was reminded of what happened at the beginning of April 2002 in Germany: a 19-year-old student entered his school and shot dead sixteen people and himself. This young man did have the power, the capacity to end the lives of a large number of people. But was this really an expression of power? This machine-gunner relied on weapons, on tools of destruction, to carry out his act, to enforce his will. His act was in fact an act of powerlessness. This case can be interpreted as a pure case of violence.

Often, of course, power and violence are combined. While ARENDT claimed that the two have specific qualities that become visible when looking at pure cases of either *power* or *violence*, she did not argue that it is always, or even most of the time, either *violence* or *power* occurring. "Nothing ... is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form. From this, it does not follow that authority, power, and violence are all the same."⁷

Furthermore, ARENDT argues that rulers are only able to exercise power if they can count on the support of society. A regime is thus only able to maintain its rule as long as the subjects are willing to lend their power to this regime, especially as long as they are willing to carry out their orders. Most of ARENDT's work is based on her analysis of totalitarianism and on her experiences with the Nazi regime in Germany. In this regime, power and violence were unmistakably combined. This system was only able to keep up its crimes against humanity as the majority of the German population did give its support, and was obedient to, the Nazi regime. Hitler was not the single, all-powerful dictator. He was only able to keep up his regime due to the wide support of the German population. Hitler was empowered by the people; he would have been powerless without the society's consent and active support.

⁶ ARENDT Hannah, *On Violence*. London, 1970. 56.

⁷ ARENDT Hannah, *On Violence*. London, 1970. 46.

The Danish Example

By contrast, the same time period gives a very powerful example of a pure case of ARENDT's understanding of *power*. In Denmark during the German occupation, almost all of the 6,500 Jews who had lived in Denmark in 1939 were saved. The Danish population acted in concert and simply denied the German occupants to deliver the Jews. The Danes did first hide the Jews and later organised what HILBERG describes as "one of the most remarkable rescue operations in history"⁸. After the Swedish government offered to receive all Danish Jews, the Danish population arranged the flight thousands of people in October 1943. "The organisers of the expedition were private people who made themselves available for the task at a moment's notice. They were doctors, schoolteachers, students, businessmen, taxi drivers, housewives... The Danish police shielded the operators by warning them of danger, individuals helped sell Jewish belongings, taxi drivers transported the Jews to the ports, house and apartment owners offered the victims shelter, Pastor Krohn handed out blank baptismal certificates, druggists supplied free stimulants to keep people awake and so on... boats left almost every day throughout October, and when the operation was over, 5919 full Jews, 1301 part Jews, and 686 non-Jews who were married to Jews had been brought ashore in Sweden."⁹

This is a very impressive example of how people in a seemingly powerless position, living under occupation and facing a very potent force, can achieve an incredible amount of power. The Danes acted in concert. Without much discussion it was clear to them that delivering the Jews is simply wrong, so they did what they considered as being right and resisted the orders of their superiors. Obviously, there was a very wide, maybe even close to total, agreement in Denmark about this procedure: otherwise, just a few people could have spoilt the whole endeavour by reporting to the Nazis who is hiding someone. Apparently next to none did. ARENDT recommended this story to all those "who wish to learn something about the enormous potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence."¹⁰

In contrast to most prevalent thinking, ARENDT makes a clear distinction between *power* and *violence*. *Power* springs up whenever people act in concert for a public-political purpose. *Violence* relies on weapons and resources rather than on the plurality of people. Finally, political rulers can remain in and with power as long as the people endorse and support them.

Christian Understanding of Power: The Story of Puah and Shiprah

I consider ARENDT's concept and thinking as very close to Christian theology and very relevant for our faith. Her ideas are about the power of the powerless, a theme that virtually runs across the whole of the Bible. There are numerous stories of upside-down power relations, of powerless people being empowered, of being encouraged to act in concert. Exodus 1, 15-22 is a powerful example:

⁸ HILBERG Raul, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. London, 1985. 566.

⁹ HILBERG Raul, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. London, 1985. 566-568.

¹⁰ ARENDT Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. London, 1994. 171.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “when you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?” The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.” So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own. Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”¹¹

The story takes place during the time when the people of Israel live in slavery in Egypt. Since the Israeli population is growing at a very fast rate, the King of Egypt fears the potential strength of the Israelites. At first he tries to weaken them by increasing their workload and by increasing oppression. However, the Israeli population continues to grow. The Pharaoh devises a new strategy, and this is where this story of Puah and Shiphra starts.

An Example of Civil Disobedience

When I first heard this story, I was almost overwhelmed by its powerfulness. I had never thought that a text from Exodus could ever come anywhere close to be one of my favourite biblical texts. Even less had I imagined that midwives could ever become my heroines or role-models.

But here are Puah and Schiphra, these two incredible women, giving us such a wonderful example of civil disobedience, of challenging the powerful ruler. They do not obey the command to murder all male children, they simply let the children live. They risk their own lives; it was more than likely that the tyrannous King of Egypt would have killed them when hearing that they did not carry out his order. Not only are Puah and Shiphra courageous, they are also *witty*: When they are called before the King to justify why they had not killed done as he had commanded them, they reply, “well, you know, these Hebrew women are so strong, as much as we rushed to their houses, whenever we arrived they had already given birth without our help. There was nothing we could do. Sorry.” Thus, they trick the King, they do not only know how to save the lives of the children, they also know how to save their own lives. Given this state of things and the seeming innocence of the midwives – what can the King do but let the two women go?²

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is the women’s motivation: “*The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do.*” They feared God—meaning they believed in God. It is because of this faith that they challenge the powerful ruler.

¹¹ *New International Version (NIV).*

“By fearing God, the midwives are made immune to any fear of the mighty King. This fear of God certainly does not mean they were actually afraid of God. Puah and Shiprah are two persons who, because they fear God, learn to differentiate how far the competence of a King goes and which matters are outside his sphere of authority. To this belongs the question of life and death. From the point of view of the midwives he exceeds his sphere of authority by giving the command to kill.”¹²

The Power of the Seemingly Powerless

Puah and Shiprah are a wonderful example of how two apparently *powerless* people can challenge a seemingly *powerful* ruler. By taking political action they are able to generate *power*, they actually manage to turn power relations upside-down by denying the King of Egypt their support. I believe this is an example of *power* in the sense ARENDT understands it. However, this story contains an aspect that is, naturally, lacking in ARENDT’s politico-philosophical conceptualisation. Her theory lacks an explanation for *why* people should actually act in concert, why they should ignore their self-interest. The source for challenging the ones who rule can come from belief and trust in God. Knowing that God’s authority is the one that should guide us rather than the authority of political rulers, we are empowered to act against oppression and for human life. I certainly do not mean to say that it is only Christians who can act in this way—far from it. All I mean to say is that our faith can give us the strength to challenge oppression, and it can give us guidance in differentiating between right and wrong. The story of Puah and Shiprah is just one example of biblical stories about empowered powerless people. For me personally, it is one of the most powerful stories of my faith and I feel called to action by this.

Let me end this article by quoting a poem by Adrienne RICH:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.*

¹² TRAUSCHKE Martina, *Sermon on Exodus 1, 15-22*. March 19th 2000, Kreuzkirche Hannover, Germany.

Understanding power in ARENDT's sense as acting in concert and internalising the meaning of the Quechua word *ushay*, let our hearts be moved and let us cast our lot with the Puahs and Shiprahs of today to reconstitute the world.

Suggested Reading

- ARENDRT Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. London, 1994.
 ARENDT Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, 1968.
 ARENDT Hannah, *On Violence*. London, 1970.
 ARENDT Hannah, *On Revolution*. Harmondsworth, 1973.
 CANOVAN Margaret, *Hannah Arendt – A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge, 1992.
 D'ENTRÈVES Maurizio Passerin, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*. Routledge, 1994.
 HILBERG Raul, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. London, 1985.
 KINTTO Lucas, *We will not Dance on our Grandparents' Tombs – Indigenous Uprising in Ecuador*. London, 2000.
 MARSH David – STOKER Gerry (eds.), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. Basingstoke, 1995.
 WESTWOOD Sallie, *Power and the Social*. London, 1999.

Silke LECHNER:

El fruto de la cooperación – un concepto inusual de poder

El artículo cuestiona el concepto tradicional de poder, el cual es usualmente definido como la habilidad de ejercer control sobre otra persona. El concepto radicalmente opuesto a este tipo de poder de Hannah Arendt, se introduce entonces: poder es la habilidad de los seres humanos para actuar en concierto. Arendt traza una clara distinción entre poder y violencia pues ambas tienen diferentes características, aunque en ocasiones se presentan juntos. En la segunda parte del artículo el concepto de Arendt se conecta con el concepto de poder en el cristianismo. La historia bíblica de Sifra y Fúa en Éxodo 1:15-22, se utiliza como un ejemplo para demostrar cómo dos personas, aparentemente insignificantes, retan a un gobernador aparentemente poderoso. Esta historia nos presenta un poderoso ejemplo de desobediencia civil y nos anima a continuar desafiando y oponiéndonos a la opresión y la violencia.

Silke LECHNER:

Le fruit de la coopération – Une vision inhabituelle du pouvoir

Cet article met en cause le concept traditionnel de pouvoir, entendu comme la capacité d'exercer une domination sur d'autres personnes. Hannah Arendt introduit une approche radicalement différente du pouvoir: le pouvoir est la capacité des hommes à agir de concert. Elle distingue nettement le pouvoir de la violence, éléments qui possèdent tous deux des caractéristiques très différentes, bien que souvent associés. La deuxième partie de l'article traite du concept de pouvoir dans le christianisme. L'exemple de l'histoire biblique de Pua et Shiphra, Exode 1:15-22, illustre comment deux personnes apparemment sans pouvoir peuvent défier avec succès un dirigeant ostensiblement puissant. Cette histoire constitue un exemple magistral de désobéissance civile, qui doit nous encourager à contester l'oppression et la violence.