Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power

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MAX Weber defined (*Macht*) as the possibility of forcing one's own will on the behavior of others. Hannah Arendt, on the contrary, understands power as the ability to agree upon a common course of action in unconstrained communication. Both represent power as a potency that is actualized in actions, but each takes a different model of action as a basis.

"Power" in Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, and Hannah Arendt

Max Weber takes the teleological model of action as his point of departure: an individual subject (or a group that can be regarded as an individual) chooses the appropriate means to realize a goal that it has set for itself. Goal-attainment or success consists in bringing about a state in the world that fulfills the goal in question. To the extent that his success depends on the behavior of another subject, the actor must have at his disposal the means to instigate the other to the desired behavior. Weber calls this disposition over means to influence the will of another "power." Hannah Arendt reserves for it the term "force" (*Gewalt*). The purposive-rational actor, who is interested only in the success of his action, must dispose of means with which he can compel a subject capable

of choice, whether by the threat of sanctions, by persuasion, or by a clever channeling of choices. As Weber puts it: "Power means every chance within a social relationship to assert one's will even against opposition."[1] The only alternative to coercion (*Zwang*) exercised by one side against the other is free agreement among participants. But the teleological model of action provides only for actors who are oriented to their own success and not to reaching agreement. It admits of agreement processes only to the extent to which they appear to the participants as means for attaining their respective goals. But an agreement of this sort, which is pursued one-sidedly with the proviso of being instrumental for one's own success, is not meant seriously; it does not fulfill the conditions of a consensus brought about without constraint.

Hannah Arendt starts from another model of action, the communicative:

> Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.[2]

The fundamental phenomenon of power is not the instrumentalization of *another's* will, but the formation of a *common* will in a communication directed to reaching agreement. This could, of course, be understood in such a way that "power" and "force" merely designate two different aspects of the same exercise of political rule. "Power" would then mean the consent of the governed that is mobilized for collective goals, that is, their readiness to support the political leader-

[1] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925), 1: 16, 2: 1. Parsons distinguishes four types of exercise of power: persuasion, activation of commitments, inducement, coercion. Cf. Talcott Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," in his *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (New York: Free Press, 1967), pp. 310 ff.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 44.

ship; while "force" would mean the disposition over resources and means of coercion, in virtue of which a political leadership makes and carries through binding decisions in order to realize collective goals. This idea has in fact inspired the systems-theoretic concept of power.

Talcott Parsons understands by power the general capacity of a social system "to get things done in the interest of collective goals."[3] The mobilization of consent produces the power which is transformed into binding decisions through the exploitation of social resources.[4] Parsons can bring the two phenomena which Arendt contrasts as power and force under one unified concept of power because he understands power as the property of a system which behaves toward its own components according to the same schema that characterizes the behavior of the purposive-rational actor toward the external world: "I have defined power as the capacity of a social system to mobilize resources to attain collective goals."[5] He repeats at the level of systems theory the same teleological concept of power (as the potential to realize goals) that Weber pursued at the level of action theory. In both cases, what is specific to the power of unifying speech, what separates it from force, is lost. The power of agreement-oriented communication to produce consensus is opposed to this force, because seriously intended agreement is an end in itself and cannot be instrumentalized for other ends.

The agreement of those who take counsel together in order to act in common—"an opinion upon which many publicly are in agreement"[6]—signifies power insofar as it rests on convic-

[3] Talcott Parsons, "Authority, Legitimation and Political Action," in his *Structure and Process in Modern Societies* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), p. 181.

[4] Talcott Parsons, "Voting and the Equilibrium of the American Political System," in *Sociological Theory and Modern Society*, pp. 224–225: "The amount of its power is an attribute of the total system and is a function of several variables. These are the support that can be mobilized by those exercising power, the facilities they have access to (notably the control of the productivity of the economy), and the legitimation that can be accorded to the position of the holders of power . . . ."

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 193.

[6] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 71.

tion and thus on that peculiarly forceless force with which insights assert themselves. Let us attempt to clarify this. The strength of a consensus brought about in unconstrained communication is not measured against any success but against the claim to rational validity that is immanent in speech. Of course, a conviction that is formed in the give and take of public discussion can also be manipulated; but even successful manipulation must take rationality claims into account. We allow ourselves to be convinced of the truth of a statement, the rightness of a norm, the veracity of an utterance; the authenticity of our conviction stands and falls with belief, that is, with the consciousness that the recognition of those validity claims is rationally motivated. Convictions can be manipulated, but not the rationality claim from which they subjectively draw their force.

In short, the communicatively produced power of common convictions originates in the fact that those involved are oriented to reaching agreement and not primarily to their respective individual successes. It is based on the fact that they do not use language "perlocutionarily," merely to instigate other subjects to a desired behavior, but "illocutionarily," that is, for the noncoercive establishment of intersubjective relations. Hannah Arendt disconnects the concept of power from the teleological model; power is built up in communicative action; it is a collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved. If, however, power is no longer thought of as a potential for realizing goals, if it is not actualized in purposive-rational action, then in what is it expressed, and for what can it be used?

Hannah Arendt regards the development of power as an end in itself. Power serves to maintain the praxis from which it springs. It becomes consolidated and embodied in political institutions which secure those very forms of life that are centered in reciprocal speech. Power therefore manifests itself (a) in orders that protect liberty, (b) in resistance against forces

that threaten political liberty, and (c) in those revolutionary actions that found new institutions of liberty.

> It is the people's support that lends power to the institutions of a country, and this support is but the continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with. . . . All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them. This is what Madison meant when he said "all government rests on opinion," a word no less true for the various forms of monarchy than for democracies.[7]

It becomes clear at this point that the communications concept of power also has a normative content. Is such a concept scientifically useful? Is it at all suited to descriptive purposes? I will try to answer this question in several steps. I will first show how Hannah Arendt introduces and grounds her concept. Then I would like to offer a reminder of how she employs it. Finally, I want to deal with a few weaknesses in the concept; in my view these derive less from its normative status than from the fact that Arendt remains bound to the historical and conceptual constellation of classical Greek philosophy.

The Structure of Unimpaired Intersubjectivity

Hannah Arendt's principal philosophical work, *The Human Condition* (1958), serves to systematically renew the Aristotelian concept of praxis. The author does not rely on an exegesis of classical texts; she drafts an anthropology of communicative action—a counterpart to Arnold Gehlen's anthropology of purposeful action (*Der Mensch*, 1940, 1950). Whereas Gehlen examines the behavioral circuit of instrumental action as the most important reproductive mechanism of the species, Arendt analyzes the form of intersubjectivity generated in the

[7] Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 41.

praxis of speech as the basic feature of cultural life. Communicative action is the medium in which the intersubjectively shared life-world is formed. It is the "space of appearance" in which actors enter, encounter one another, are seen and heard. The spatial dimension of the life-world is determined by the "fact of human plurality": every interaction unifies the multiple perspectives of perception and action of those present, who as individuals occupy an inconvertible standpoint. The temporal dimension of the life-world is determined by the "fact of human natality": the birth of every individual means the possibility of a new beginning; to act means to be able to seize the initiative and to do the unanticipated. Furthermore, the life-world is essentially charged with securing individual and group identity in social space and historical time. In communication, individuals appear actively as unique beings and reveal themselves in their subjectivity. At the same time they must recognize one another as equally responsible beings, that is, as beings capable of intersubjective agreement —the rationality claim immanent in speech grounds a radical equality. Finally, the life-world itself is filled, so to speak, with praxis, with the "web of human relationships." This comprises the stories in which actors are involved as doers and sufferers.[8]

One may regard the method with which Hannah Arendt develops her practical philosophy—a method reminiscent of Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology—as inadequate; but the intention is clear: she wants to read off of the formal properties of communcative action (or praxis) the general structures of an unimpaired intersubjectivity. These structures set the conditions of normalcy for human existence, indeed for an existence worthy of human beings. Owing to its innovative potential, the domain of praxis is, however, highly unstable and in need of protection. In societies organized around a state, this is looked after by political institutions. These are fed by the power that springs from unimpaired intersubjectivity;

[8] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 181 ff.

and they must in turn protect the susceptible structures of intersubjectivity against deformations if they are not themselves to deteriorate. From this follows the central hypothesis that Hannah Arendt untiringly repeats: no political leadership can with impunity replace power through force; and it can gain power only from a nondeformed public realm. The public-political realm has also been conceived by others as a generator, if not of power then of the legitimation of power; but Hannah Arendt insists that a public-political realm can produce legitimate power only so long as structures of nondistorted communication find their expression in it.

> What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence; and power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away, and history is full of examples that the greatest material riches cannot compensate for this loss. Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence.[9]

Some Applications of the Communications Concept of Power

Hannah Arendt does not test her hypothesis against examples of the decline of great empires. Her historical investigations resolve instead around two extreme cases: the destruction of political liberty under totalitarian rule (a), and the revolutionary establishment of political liberty (b).[10] Both investigations apply the concept of power, and in such a way that the deformations in Western mass democracies are illuminated from opposite sides.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951); Arendt, *On Revolution*.

(a) Every political order that isolates its citizens from one another through mistrust, and cuts off the public exchange of opinions, degenerates to a rule based on violence. It destroys the communicative structures in which alone power can originate. Fear heightened to terror forces each to shut himself off from every other; at the same time it destroys the distances between individuals. It takes from them the power of initiative and robs their interaction of its power to spontaneously unify what is separated: "pressed together with everyone, each is totally isolated from all."[11] The totalitarian rule which Hannah Arendt examines in the cases of Nazism and Stalinism is not only a modern version of classical tyrannies; if it were, it would merely silence the communicative movement of the public realm. Its specific achievement, however, is precisely the mobilization of depoliticized masses:

> On the one hand, the police state destroys all relations between men that still remain after the discontinuance of the public-political sphere; on the other hand, it demands that those who have been fully isolated and forsaken by one another be able to be brought into political actions (although naturally not to genuine political action). . . . Totalitarian rule does not only rob men of their capacity to act; rather, with inexorable consistency, it makes them—as if they were really only a single man—into accomplices in all actions undertaken and crimes committed by the totalitarian regime.[12]

The totalitarian rule of the Nazi regime historically arose on the basis of a mass democracy. This is one of the occasions that motivated Hannah Arendt to a vigorous critique of the privatism built into modern societies. Whereas the theorists of democratic elitism (following Schumpeter) commend representative government and the party system as channels for the political participation of a depoliticized mass, Arendt sees the danger precisely in this situation. Mediatizing the population

[11] Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), p. 745. Cf. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, part 3.

[12] Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, p. 749.

through highly bureaucratized administrations, parties, and organizations just supplements and fortifies those privatistic forms of life which provide the psychological base for mobilizing the unpolitical, that is, for establishing totalitarian rule.[13]

[13] On this insight is based the thesis of the banality of evil which Arendt illustrated in the case of Eichmann (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* [New York: Viking Press, 1963]). It can already be found in an essay on "Organized Guilt," written in 1944 and published immediately after the war in *Die Wandlung*; an English translation appeared in *Jewish Frontier*, January 1945: "Heinrich Himmler does not belong to those intellectuals who come from the dark no-man's-land between bohemian and 'five-penny' existence, and whose significance for the formation of the Nazi elite has recently been pointed out again and again. He is neither a bohemian like Goebbels, nor a sex criminal like Streicher, nor a perverted fanatic like Hitler, nor an adventurer like Göring. He is a 'Babbitt' with all the appearance of respectability, with all the habits of the good family man, who does not cheat on his wife and who wants to secure a decent future for his children. And he consciously built up his newest organization of terror, which encompasses the entire country, on the assumption that most men are not bohemians, not fanatics, not adventurers, not sex criminals and not sadists, but in the first place 'jobholders' and good family men. I think it was Péguy who called the family man the 'grand adventurier du 20e siècle'; he died too soon to experience in him the great criminal of the century. We have been so accustomed to admiring or smiling at the good-natured solicitude of the family man, the serious concentration on the welfare of the family, the solemn commitment to devote his life to wife and children, that we scarcely perceived how the caring father, who was concerned above all for security, was transformed against his will, under the pressure of the chaotic economic conditions of our time, into an adventurer who with all his anxiety could never be sure of the next day. His pliability was already demonstrated in the homogenization at the start of the regime. It turned out that he was willing to sacrifice conscience, honor and human dignity for the sake of pension. life-insurance, the secure existence of wife and children" (Hannah Arendt, *Die verborgene Tradition* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976], pp. 40 ff).

It is this insight which turned both Hannah Arendt and her teacher, Karl Jaspers, in spite of their unmistakably elitist mentality, into intrepid radical democrats. How Arendt conceived the peculiar connection of participatory democracy with the elitist structures that she regarded as necessary, is revealed in the following passage (in which she is speaking of the Rätesystem, the system of soviets or councils): "It would be tempting to spin out further the potentialities of the councils, but it certainly is wiser to say with Jefferson, 'Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments'—the best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous tendency toward the formation of pseudo-political mass movements, or rather, the best, the most natural way for interspersing it at the grass roots with an 'elite' that is chosen by no one, but constitutes itself. The joys of public happiness and the responsibilities for public business would then become the share of those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be 'happy' without it. Politically, they are the best, and it is the task of good government and the sign of a well-ordered republic to assure them of their rightful place in the public realm. To be sure, such an "aristocra-

Thomas Jefferson, the radical democrat among the fathers of the American constitution, already had

> at least a foreboding of how dangerous it might be to allow the people a share in public power without providing them at the same time with more public space than the ballot box and with more opportunity to make their voices heard in public than election day. What he perceived to be the mortal danger to the republic was that the Constitution had given all power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of *being* republicans and of *acting* as citizens. In other words, the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity, and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens.[14]

(b) Therein lies the motif that inspired Hannah Arendt to her investigations of the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century, the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and the civil disobedience and student protests of the sixties. In connection with emancipatory movements she is interested in the power of common conviction: the withdrawal of obedience to institutions that have lost their legitimacy; the confrontation of communicative power with the means of force of a coercive but impotent state apparatus; the beginnings of a new political order and the attempt—the pathos of the new beginning—to hold fast to the initial revolutionary situation, to give institutional permanence to the communicative generation of power.

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tic' form of government would spell the end of general suffrage as we understand it today; for only those who as voluntary members of an 'elementary republic' have demonstrated that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world would have the right to be heard in the conduct of the business of the republic. However, this exclusion from politics should not be derogatory, since a political elite is by no means identical with a social or cultural or professional elite. The exclusion, moreover, would not depend on an outside body; if those who belong are self-chosen, those who do not belong are self-excluded. And such self-exclusion, far from being arbitrary discrimination, would in fact give substance and reality to one of the most important negative liberties we have enjoyed since the end of the ancient world, namely freedom from politics, which was unknown to Rome or Athens and which is politically perhaps the most relevant part of our Christian heritage" (*On Revolution*, pp. 283 ff).

[14] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 256.

It is fascinating to see how Hannah Arendt traces the same phenomenon over and over. When revolutionaries seize the power that lies in the streets; when a populace committed to passive resistance confronts alien tanks with their bare hands; when convinced minorities contest the legitimacy of existing laws and organize civil disobedience; when the "pure desire for action" manifests itself in the student movement—these phenomona confirm again that no one really possesses power; it "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[15] This emphatic concept of praxis is more Marxist than Aristotelian; Marx called it "critical-revolutionary activity."

Arendt identifies attempts to institutionalize direct democracy in the American town meetings around 1776, in the *sociétés populaires* in Paris between 1789 and 1793, in the sections of the Paris Commune of 1871, in the Russian soviets in 1903 and 1917, and in the *Rätedemokratie* in Germany in 1918. She sees in these different forms the only serious attempts at a constitution of liberty under the conditions of modern mass society. She traces their failure to the political defeats of the revolutionary labor movement and to the economic success of the unions and labor parties:

> . . . with the transformation of a class society into a mass society and with the substitution of a guaranteed annual wage for daily or weekly pay . . . the workers today are no longer outside of society; they are its members, and they are jobholders like everybody else. The political significance of the labor movement is now the same as that of any other pressure group.[16]

The Limits of Classical Theory

In the context in which it stands, this thesis reads a bit too smoothly; it is not a result of well balanced investigations but

[15] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 200.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 219.

issues from a philosophical construction. So far I have tried to present what I take as strong aspects and promising applications of Arendt's concept of power. Now I would like to add some comments on its weaknesses.

Arendt stylizes the image she has of the Greek polis to the essence of politics as such. This is the background to her favored conceptual dichotomies between the public and the private, between state and economy, freedom and welfare, political-practical activity and production—rigid dichotomies which modern bourgeois society and the modern state, however, escape. Thus the mere fact that in modern times something characteristically new, a complementary relationship between state and economy, established itself with the development of the capitalist mode of production already counts as the mark of a pathology, of a destructive confusion:

> In the modern world the social and the political realms are much less distinct. . . . The functionalization [of politics] makes it impossible to perceive any serious gulf between the two realms; and this is not a matter of a theory or an ideology, since with the rise of society, that is, the rise of the "household" (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm, housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a "collective" concern. In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like the waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself.[17]

Arendt rightly insists that the technical-economic overcoming of poverty is by no means a sufficient condition for the practical securing of political liberty. But she becomes the victim of a concept of politics that is inapplicable to modern conditions when she asserts that the

> intrusion of social and economic matters into the public realm, the transformation of government into administration, the re-

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

placement of personal rule by bureaucratic measures, and the attending transmutation of laws into decrees[18]

necessarily frustrate every attempt at a politically active public realm. She also views the French Revolution in this dim light; and she attributes the initial success of the foundation of liberty in America to the fact that "the politically insoluble social question did not stand in the way."[19] I cannot discuss this interpretation here.[20] I want only to indicate the curious perspective that Hannah Arendt adopts: a state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhibits its liberating efficacy just at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins—this path is unimaginable for any modern society.

Thus we are faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, the communications concept of power discloses important though extreme phenomena of the modern world to which political science has become more and more insensitive; on the other hand, it is linked with a conception of politics which, when applied to modern societies, leads to absurdities. Let us then return once more to the analysis of the concept of power. Arendt's concept of communicatively generated power can become a sharp instrument only if we extricate it from the clamps of an Aristotelian theory of action. In separating praxis from the unpolitical activities of working and laboring on the one side and of thinking on the other, Arendt traces back political power exclusively to praxis, to the speaking and acting together of individuals. Over against the production of

[18] Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 86.

[19] Hannah Arendt, *Über die Revolution* (Munich: R. Piper, 1963), p. 85; cf. *On Revolution*, pp. 62 ff.

[20] Cf. my review "Die Geschichte von den zwei Revolutionen," in Jürgen Habermas, *Kulter und Kritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 365–370.

material objects and theoretical knowledge, communicative action has to appear as the only political category. This narrowing of the political to the practical permits illuminating contrasts to the presently palpable elimination of essentially practical contents from the political process. But for this Arendt pays a certain price: (a) she screens all strategic elements, as force, out of politics; (b) she removes politics from its relations to the economic and social environment in which it is embedded through the administrative system; and (c) she is unable to grasp structural violence. Let me comment briefly on these three deficits.

Strategic Competition for Political Power

War is the classic example of strategic action. For the Greeks it was something that took place outside the walls of the city. For Hannah Arendt too strategic action is essentially unpolitical, a matter for experts. The example of warfare is of course suited to demonstrating the contrast between political power and force. Waging war manifestly involves the calculated employment of means of force, whether for the sake of threatening or of physically overcoming an opponent. But the accumulation of means of destruction does not make superpowers more powerful; military strength is (as the Vietnam War showed) often enough the counterpart to impotence. Furthermore, the example of warfare seems suitable for subsuming strategic action under instrumental action. In addition to communicative action, the *vita activa* encompasses the essentially nonsocial activities of working and laboring. And since the purposive-rational employment of military means appears to have the same structure as the use of instruments to fabricate material objects or to work up nature, Arendt equates strategic with instrumental action. So she stresses that strategic action is instrumental as well as violent, and that action of this type falls outside of the domain of the political.

The matter looks different if we place strategic action alongside communicative action, as another form of social interaction (which is, to be sure, not oriented to reaching agreement but to success); and if we contrast it with instrumental action, as nonsocial action that can also be carried out by a solitary subject. It then becomes conceptually plausible that strategic action also took place *within* the walls of the city—thus in power struggles, in the competition for positions to which the exercise of legitimate power was tied. The *acquisition* and *maintenance* of political power must be distinguished from both the *employment* of political power—that is, rule—and the *generation* of political power. In the last case, but only in the last case, the concept of praxis is helpful. No occupant of a position of authority can maintain and exercise power, if these positions are not themselves anchored in laws and political institutions whose continued existence rests ultimately on common convictions, on "an opinion upon which many are publicly in agreement."

The elements of strategic action have undoubtedly increased in scope and importance in modern societies. With the capitalist mode of production this action type, which in premodern societies dominated above all in foreign relations, also became permissible within society as the normal case for economic relationships. Modern private law grants to all commodity owners formally equivalent spheres of strategic action. Moreover, in the modern state which supplements this economic society, the struggle for political power is normalized through the institutionalization of strategic action (through the admission of an opposition, through the competition of parties and associations, through the legalization of labor struggles, etc.). These phenomena of power acquisition and maintenance have misled political theorists from Hobbes to Schumpeter to identify power with a potential for successful strategic action. Against this tradition (in which Max Weber also stands), Arendt rightly urges that strategic contests for political power neither call forth nor maintain those institu-

tions in which that power is anchored. Political institutions live not from force but from recognition.

Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the element of strategic action from the concept of the political. Let us understand the force exercised through strategic action as the ability to prevent other individuals or groups from realizing their interests.[21] In this sense force has always belonged to the means for acquiring and holding on to positions of legitimate power. In modern states this struggle for political power has even been institutionalized; it thereby became a normal component of the political system. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that someone should be able to *generate* legitimate power simply because he is in a position to prevent others from pursuing their interests. Legitimate power *arises* only among those who form common convictions in unconstrained communication.

The Employment of Power in the Political System

The communicative production of power and the struggle or strategic competition for political power can be grasped in terms of action-types; but for the employment of legitimate power the action structures through which it is exercised are not essential. Legitimate power permits the occupants of positions of authority to make binding decisions. This employment of power is of interest more from the vantagepoint of systems theory than from that of action theory. Hannah Arendt naturally resists leaving her action-theoretic framework in order to inject a functionalist analysis into it. In her view, the sphere of human affairs is not to be distantiated according to the standards of an objectivistic social science, because knowledge that is gained in this attitude cannot via enlightenment flow back into the commonsense world. In this respect, Arendt would not draw any distinction even between

[21] Cf. my elaboration of this concept in Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), pp. 250–257.

Hegel and Parsons; both investigate historical and social processes that pass over the heads of those involved.[22] She herself tries to capture this process aspect of social life in an action category by differentiating between work and labor. Labor differs from work not in the action structures themselves, but in the fact that the concept of "labor" represents productive activity as an expenditure of labor power which has to be reproduced, and is thus located in the functional context of production, consumption, and reproduction. With her reservations, Arendt unnecessarily disadvantages herself vis-à-vis the systems analyses that are usual today. On the other hand, her mistrust is only too justified when systems theory is in turn cut off from action theory.

This can be seen in Parsons when, for instance, he discusses C. Wright Mills's zero-sum concept of power. Parsons wants to understand power as an augmentable good, like credit or buying power. If one side gains political power, the other side need not lose any. A zero-sum game results only when different parties struggle for available power positions, but not from the point of view of the rise and fall of the power of political institutions. Parsons and Arendt are in agreement on this point. But they have rather divergent ideas of the process of power generation. Parsons regards this process as a rise in activity; it might be roughly sketched as follows: in order that the output of the state apparatus can grow, the scope of action of the administrative system has to be expanded; this in turn requires a stronger input of rather unspecific support or mass loyalty. Thus the process of power enhancement begins on the input side. Political leaders must arouse new needs in the electorate in order that increasing demands arise which can be met only through heightened administrative activity.[23]

[22] Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 45 ff.

[23] Parsons, "On the Concept of Political Power," p. 340: "Collective leadership may then be conceived as the bankers or 'brokers' who can mobilize the binding commitments of their constituents in such a way that the totality of commitments made by the collectivity as a whole can be enhanced. . . . The problem then is that of a basis for breaking through the circular stability of a zero-sum power system. The crucial point

From the systems perspective, the production of power appears as a problem that can be solved by a stronger influence on the will of the population exerted by the political leadership. To the extent that this takes place by means of psychic constraint, by persuasion and manipulation, it amounts, in Hannah Arendt's view, to an increase in force but not in the power of the political system. For power can, on her assumption, arise only in the structures of unconstrained communication; it cannot be generated "from above." Parsons would have to dispute this hypothesis; given a set of cultural values, there can be for him no *structural* limits to the production of power. On the other hand, in the light of peculiar cases of power inflation and deflation, Parsons would very much like to be able to differentiate between serious and unserious power credits:

> There is a fine line between solid, responsible and constructive political leadership which in fact commits the collectivity beyond its capacities for instantaneous fulfillment of all obligations, and reckless overextendedness, just as there is a fine line between responsible banking and "wildcatting."[24]

But it is difficult to see how this "fine line" could be conceived in terms of Parsons's own systems theory. Hannah Arendt offers a solution precisely to this problem. She attempts to derive from the structures of unimpaired intersubjectivity the conditions of the public-political realm that must be met if power is to be communicatively engendered or expanded.

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is that this can only happen if the collectivity and its members are ready to assume new binding obligations over and above those previously in force. The crucial need is to justify this extension and to transform the 'sentiment' that something ought to be done into a commitment to implement the sentiment by positive action, including coercive sanctions if necessary. The crucial agency of this process seems to be leadership, precisely conceived as possessing a component analytically independent of the routine power position of office, which defines the leader as the mobilizer of justification for policies."

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 342.

The Communicative Production of Power–A Variation

Let us summarize the two points of criticism. The concept of the political must extend to the strategic competition for political power and to the employment of power within the political system. Politics cannot, as with Arendt, be identified with the praxis of those who talk together in order to act in common. Conversely, the dominant theory narrows this concept to phenomena of political competition and power allocation and does not do justice to the real phenomenon of the generation of power. At this point the distinction between power and force becomes sharp. It calls to mind that the political system cannot dispose of power at will. Power is a good *for* which political groups struggle and *with* which a political leadership manages things; but in a certain way both find this good already at hand; they don't produce it. This is the impotence of the powerful—they have to borrow their power from the producers of power. This is the credo of Hannah Arendt.

The objection thereto lies ready at hand: even if the leadership in modern democracies has to periodically procure legitimation, history is replete with evidence which shows that political rule must have functioned, and functions, otherwise than as Arendt claims. Certainly, it speaks *for* her thesis that political rule can last only so long as it is recognized as legitimate. It speaks *against* her thesis that basic institutions and structures which are stabilized through political rule could only in rare cases be the expression of an "opinion on which many were publicly in agreement"—at least if one has, as Hannah Arendt does, a strong concept of the public realm. These two facts can be brought together if we assume that structural violence is built into political institutions (but not only into them). Structural violence does not manifest itself *as force*; rather, unperceived, it blocks those communications in which convictions effective for legitimation are formed and

passed on. Such an hypothesis about inconspicuously working communication blocks can explain, perhaps, the formation of ideologies; with it one can give a plausible account of how convictions are formed in which subjects deceive themselves about themselves and their situation. Ideologies are, after all, illusions that are outfitted with the power of common convictions. This proposal is an attempt to render the communicative production of power in a more realistic version. In systematically restricted communications, those involved form convictions subjectively free from constraint, convictions which are, however, illusionary. They thereby communicatively generate a power which, as soon as it is institutionalized, can also be used against them.

If we wanted to accept this proposal, we would of course have to specify a critical standard and to distinguish between illusionary and nonillusionary convictions. Hannah Arendt doubts that this is possible. She holds fast to the classical distinction between theory and practice; practice rests on opinions and convictions that cannot be true or false in the strict sense:

> No opinion is self-evident. In matters of opinion, but not in matters of truth, our thinking is truly discursive, running as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to the other through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from all these particularities to some impartial generality.[25]

An antiquated concept of theoretical knowledge that is based on ultimate insights and certainties keeps Arendt from comprehending the process of reaching agreement about practical questions as rational discourse. If, by contrast, "representative thought"[26]—which examines the generalizability of practical

[25] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 3rd series (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), pp. 115 ff.

[26] "Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent, that is, represent them. This process of representation does not

standpoints, that is, the legitimacy of norms—is not separated from argumentation by an abyss, then a cognitive foundation can also be claimed for the power of common convictions. In this case, such power is anchored in the de facto recognition of validity claims that can be discursively redeemed and fundamentally criticized. Arendt sees a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments. She has to look for another foundation for the power of opinion, and she finds it in the capability of responsible subjects to make and to keep promises.

> We mentioned before the power generated when people gather together and "act in concert," which disappears the moment they depart. The force that keeps them together . . . is the force of mutual promise or contract.[27]

She regards as the basis of power the contract between free and equal parties with which they place themselves under mutual obligation. To secure the normative core of an original

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blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority, but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while pondering a given issue and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (It is this capacity for an 'enlarged mentality' that enables men to judge; as such, it was discovered by Kant—in the first part of his *Critique of Judgment*—who, however, did not recognize the political and moral implications of his discovery.) The very process of opinion-formation is determined by those in whose places somebody thinks and uses his own mind, and the only condition for this exertion of imagination is disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests. Hence, even if I shun all company or am completely isolated while forming an opinion, I am not simply together only with myself in the solitude of philosophic thought; I remain in this world of mutual interdependence where I can make myself the representative of everybody else. To be sure, I can refuse to do this and form an opinion that takes only my own interest, or the interests of the group to which I belong, into account; nothing indeed is more common, even among highly sophisticated people, than this blind obstinacy which becomes manifest in lack of imagination and failure to judge. But the very quality of an opinion as of a judgment depends upon its degree of impartiality" (Arendt, "Truth and Politics," p. 115).

[27] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 244 ff.

equivalence between power and freedom, Hannah Arendt finally places more trust in the venerable figure of the contract than in her own concept of a praxis, which is grounded in the rationality of practical judgment.[28] She retreats instead to the contract theory of natural law.

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS MCCARTHY

[28] Cf. R. J. Bernstein, "H. Arendt: Opinion and Judgment," paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, 1976.