

William Hao

E303D

Professor Christian

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Prompt: Thinking through the theory we have read this semester, how do you think Zizek and Arendt would respond to the question: "Does violence have a history?" (476 words)

Slavoj Zizek and Hannah Arendt would likely both agree that violence has a history, but their reasoning and emphasis for why it does differ. Arendt, in *Reflections on Violence*, traces violence's history through political and technological developments, while Zizek, in *Violence*, emphasizes a persistent, underlying "symbolic" violence that transcends history due to its roots in language and ideology.

For Arendt, the history of violence revolves around new technology and new forms of power. She observes that historically, violence was often viewed as subordinate to politics or economics. However, the 20th century's technological innovations in weapons and "the massive intrusion of criminal violence into politics" (Arendt 6) fundamentally altered this. Modern weapons' "destructive potential" can destroy or prevent political goals easily, leading to a "complete reversal in the relationship between power and violence" (Arendt 1, 3). Arendt distinguishes the way violence operates from power, believing that violence always needs concrete tools and a clear justification through future ends or goals, whereas power arises from a collective action and derives legitimacy from consent. Crucially, she argues, "Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course its end is the disappearance of power"

(Arendt 21). Her analysis of events like French student protests shows how easily bureaucratic systems become vulnerable when power weakens due to violence (Arendt 17). While this overlaps somewhat with Frantz Fanon's view of violence as a response to colonial oppression, Arendt sees violence as a rational tactic especially for short-term goals, but—contrast with Fanon—it ultimately destroys political power and is incapable of creating legitimate political structures.

Conversely, Žižek posits that while specific forms of violence have a history, a deeper “symbolic” violence is built into the very structures people operate on, like language and ideology. Citing Hegel, Žižek writes that “there is something violent in the very symbolisation of a thing”, explaining that language operates violently by imposing external meanings on things that don't necessarily need or have meaning (Žižek 61). One example of this is how language can give people hierarchical labels, like a “Master-Signifier”, which led to violence when the imagined concept of “the Jew” as “less-than-human” or “Other-enemy” fueled anti-Semitic genocides (Žižek 56, 62). Historical shifts or trends, like fear of immigrants or economic collapse, are simply new forms of this linguistic violence, a pattern he calls “post-political bio-politics” (Žižek 41). From this, Žižek's view on violence aligns with Althusser's claim of ideology's persistent structure: while specific ideologies evolve, the fundamental idea of symbolic violence remains constant.

In sum, Arendt and Žižek both show that violence has a history through different arguments. Arendt argues that violence's history is tied to the decline of political power and modern technological advancements. Žižek believes that violence manifests historically through different ideologies, from anti-Semitism to “bio-politics”, but insists that “symbolic” violence endures across history (or, as Althusser would say, has no history).