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On Violence (Harvest Book)



Synopsis

An analysis of the nature, causes, and significance of violence in the second half of the twentieth century. Arendt also reexamines the relationship between war, politics, violence, and power.

Incisive, deeply probing, written with clarity and grace, it provides an ideal framework for understanding the turbulence of our times;(Nation). Index.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was an influential German political theorist and philosopher whose works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

This was a really great work of political theory by Arendt. It explores violence, mostly through the lens of the 1960s when she was writing this book. It looks at the student rebellions across the world, in both democracies and communist countries. The coincidence of the uprisings is interesting, and she posits that they are both protesting for the same reason, albeit in different manifestations. Students around the world were looking for freedom. The students in communist countries were looking for freedom to express themselves through both speech and action and thereby have an effect on the processes and progress of their respective countries. The students in the Western democracies were protesting their lack of freedom in action. They protested the lack of agency they

felt. Both sets of students felt impotent and unimportant, as if they entirely didn't count, and decided to protest against it. Some of the most impacting quotes for me: "Rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; no one reacts with rage to an incurable disease or to an earthquake or, for that matter, to social conditions that seem to be unchangeable. Only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise. Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage, and this reaction by no means necessarily reflects personal injury, as is demonstrated by the whole history of injury, as is demonstrated by the whole history of revolution, where invariably members of the upper classes touched off and then led the rebellions of the oppressed and downtrodden." "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance... Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it." "Where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime is the best excuse for doing nothing." "Racism, white or black, is fraught with violence by definition because it objects to natural organic facts - a white or black skin - which no persuasion or power could change; all one can do, when the chips are down, is to exterminate their bearers. Racism, as distinguished from race, is not a fact of life, but an ideology, and the deeds it leads to are not reflex actions, but deliberate acts based on pseudo-scientific theories. Violence in interracial struggle is always murderous, but it is not "irrational

Professor Arendt has again turned the commonplace on its head with her wit and piercing logic, and has used her unfiltered and unadulterated thinking to milk additional meanings and understandings from the accepted conventional wisdom. Her clean thinking and careful analysis has become a force to be reckoned with, and as a result, has acquired a life of its own. After reaching the end of this sharply focused essay, I discovered it is best read in reverse, beginning with section III and working backwards. It is a tutorial on the origins, use and misuse of violence, and its associated concepts of power, strength, authority, and terror, and to a much lesser extent also, influence, control, obedience, and command. It is section III that deals with the origins of violence in both human and animal. And as is true with the other sections, existing common sense and settled sociological theology are reopened and challenged. Both Konrad Lorentz and B.F. Skinner's theories, for instance are placed anew under the microscope, in light of human, rather than just anthropomorphized animal experience, with surprisingly new understandings emerging. Section II deals with the definitional slipperiness of these concepts as they have been used and misused --

again with surprisingly new interpretations. And again, the standard understandings are reopened for further analysis and the old authorities are challenged to redefine their often ossified and misleading meanings and interpretations. Section I begins with the existing experience at the time the book was first written (1957) and includes analyses of violence at both the international and the national level, but not at the interpersonal level. Although these examples are anything but fresh, this in no way affects the freshness of the analysis. I was especially impressed with the way the author ripped the so-called revolutionary movements of the 60s, including the black power movement and Third World revolutionary movements in general. As she puts it so trenchantly: "The Third World is not a reality but an ideology." The section on terror however, left me cold: in light of the likes of Osama bin Laden, the role and effects of terror, could certainly use some updating. My only other complaint is that the analysis is almost too abstract and almost too removed from the meat of contemporary experience, in the sense that the moral dimension is never brought directly into the picture. This omission makes the analyses seem almost synthetic, sterile and wholly academic, although I am sure with the author's background this could not have been her intent. Still, even if one has to imagine how to factor her analyses back into contemporary situations, the wisdom contained in this short volume and the intellectual skill with which it is done, are priceless.

Five stars

Hannah Arendt is an American philosopher whose most famous work is probably "Eichman in Jerusalem". This book discusses the difference between Violence and Power, where Violence has the ability to make others obey you. Violence is further distinguished from Power by the requirement that it include an implement in which to carry out the violence, as in the form of a gun or a knife or a bomb. This is short work, really just an essay but it is both simplistic and powerful in its' discussion of Violence and its role in man's affairs. Highly recommended.

I really liked it. It is a very nice book examining the violence and its effects with a very sophisticated and comparative perspective.

Perceptive, penetrating analysis of human reality...timely reading

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