

sufficient basis for the authority of the United States Constitution and the law made pursuant to the Constitution. This is possible without regard to the “real” truth or falsity of the facts assumed in the formation of those beliefs. In fact, as the American example illustrates, as a practical matter, once these convictions have put down sufficiently deep roots in society, they may cease to be examined for their truth or falsity. No system of norms, legal or otherwise, can survive if the assumptions about its origin are subject to continuous, self-consciously critical scrutiny. Effective legal authority is thus a textbook example of what Neil MacCormick called a “thought object,” something that “exist[s] by being believed in, rather than being believed in by virtue of [its] existence” (“The Ethics of Legalism,” *Ratio Juris* 2, no. 2 [1989]: 191).

—Richard S. Kay

*University of Connecticut School of Law, Hartford, Connecticut, USA*



Caroline Ashcroft: *Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 278.)

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The question of violence and its role in public life sits at the heart of Hannah Arendt’s work on “the political.” Yet, as Caroline Ashcroft argues in *Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, this influential thinker’s understanding of the relationship between violence and power has been largely misinterpreted. In particular, Ashcroft suggests that standard accounts of Arendt’s political theory—interpretations typically predicated on the understanding that acts of violence have no place in the political realm—do not capture accurately how violence can sometimes be political. Whereas scholars like John McGowan and Patricia Owens (the former of whom outlines how violence is either nonpolitical or antipolitical and the latter how it can be pre-political), Ashcroft maintains that certain forms of violence, specifically those she contends are both based in power and that serve a thoroughly public/political end (77, 158, 211), can be considered political in Arendtian terms. This is a theoretically daring thesis that challenges readers of Arendt’s work to think about violence politically—a conceptual framing that has historically been understood as a contradiction in terms. If followed to its end, it also asks us to consider how acts of violence might be seen as a politically legitimate means both to (re)make and, as Arendt writes in *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, 14), to “care for the world.”

*Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt* is a work of intellectual history that “leans toward a political rather than philosophical reading of Arendt” (13). Ashcroft draws widely from across Arendt’s body of thought—rather than being specifically focused on Arendt’s *On Violence* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970)—and, in an effort to provide her readers with a “political reading” of Arendt’s work, she explores various periods of political history to support her findings. Developed in two main parts, this book’s overarching argument—that “politics may involve some form of violence in some contexts” (52)—first unfolds in terms of an extended discussion of Arendt’s critique of sovereignty (chapter 1). Ashcroft subsequently illustrates how an Arendtian argument for political violence can be identified in Arendt’s early writings on the Jewish people and the formation of a Jewish army (chapter 2); is further developed in terms of her thinking about the Roman tradition of law and politics (chapter 3); and is demonstrated by her theorization of the American and French Revolutions (chapter 4). In chapter 5, Ashcroft brings together the aspects of the first section’s arguments, contrasting what she takes to be a conceptually viable, world-engendering, and public-oriented form of violence with the illegitimate, antipolitical notion of “social violence” (143) that Arendt associates with the so-called rise of the social in modernity (see *The Human Condition* [University of Chicago Press, 1958], 33–49).

Part 2 applies Ashcroft’s theory of violence to Arendt’s understanding of American political affairs in the 1960s (chapter 6), before concluding the book with a reconsideration of the prominent, Arendt-inspired approaches to agonism found in the work of Bonnie Honig, Seyla Benhabib, and Chantal Mouffe (chapter 7). It is in this section—as a part of a study of Arendt’s criticism of the American presence in Vietnam and her understanding of the American civil rights movement—that Ashcroft illustrates how, for Arendt, “there is no hard and fast line between civil disobedience and revolution” (184). Furthermore, it is here that Ashcroft illustrates how the violence associated with Arendt’s notion of “work”—the world-making activity of *homo faber* that Arendt develops alongside the activities of “labor” and “action” within her tripartite theory of the *vita activa* (the active life)—can sometimes be political. Although Arendt maintains that the “work” and “workmanship” of *homo faber* is an “unpolitical way of life,” yet “certainly not” an “antipolitical one” (*Human Condition*, 212), Ashcroft’s more thoroughly “expansive” (214) interpretation of Arendt’s political theory is premised on the understanding that the violence of work, unlike the “social violence” associated with Arendt’s critique of sovereignty and “the social,” can nevertheless be political if it is based in power and if it serves a thoroughly public end.

Maša Mrovlje, in her own review of this book (see *Perspectives on Politics* 19, no. 4 [2021]: 1301–2), contends that Ashcroft too aggressively blurs the theoretical lines Arendt draws between the activities of work and action. According to Mrovlje, the politically positive account of violence outlined by Ashcroft threatens the political world by overemphasizing the role played by acts of violence in achieving a predetermined political goal. Given

Arendt's feelings about the "substitution of making [work] for acting and the concomitant degradation of politics into a means to obtain an allegedly 'higher' end" (*Human Condition*, 229), Mrovlje's criticism is apt. Accordingly, there is a need to proceed with caution, despite the compelling case made by Ashcroft. If we are not careful, we run the risk of privileging the violent process of achieving a particular political aim at the expense of those things which are most integral to Arendt's theory of politics: spontaneity, freedom, and the power that is engendered by a plurality of people when they speak and act politically together.

What happens, however, if we accept Ashcroft's findings, and thus embrace the more thoroughly violent, radical version of Arendt's work theorized in this book? For me, the implications are clear, and deeply significant: Ashcroft's reflections on violence suggest that political practices of "car[ing] for the world" — which Arendt believes are fundamentally important to sustaining the public realm — are, potentially, and perhaps sometimes necessarily, violent. That is, in order to care for the world, or to do the care-work necessary to protect, preserve, and enhance the public realm of the political, a need for a group of people to be violent, or to use violence for the sake of the political life of their community, may arise. This is thought-provoking, and could add an additional layer of theory — a consideration of the role played by violence in the work of (re)making and/or caring for the political world — to the growing body of scholarship grounded in Arendt's thoughts about public, political care. The problem here, however, is that — although Ashcroft writes in a language that is reminiscent of this Arendtian notion of public care (see, for instance, 5, 18, 22, 75, 131, 133, 157–58, 175, and 203–4) — this connection is not made explicitly. An acknowledgment of and more comprehensive engagement with Arendt's understanding of care for the world is important precisely because Ashcroft seems to suggest that violent acts can be used in a thoroughly political manner only when they are specifically employed as a means of either constituting or preserving, protecting, and enhancing — all forms of acting caringly — the space for politics. In other words, though this is an exceedingly well-argued and beautifully written book about (non)violence, it is also — and perhaps even more so — a text about how Arendt suggests we can, might, and should go about caring for the world, even if this means we need to be violent to do so.

—Christopher Peys 

*Independent researcher, Los Angeles, California, USA*

