



Feminine Re-Conceptualization of Power: Natality of Hannah Arendt and Spontaneity of Rosa Luxemburg

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Traditional views of power are defined in terms of the ability to secure compliance even against resistance. This conceptualization of power as dominance within traditional political philosophical tradition may be characterized as phallogocentric in so far as it is structured by the logic of control, domination and hierarchy. This phallogocentrism may limit the understandings of power within political thought. This suggests the existence of an alternate feminine version of power that is non-hierarchical, non-instrumental and generative, even among the works of women theorists that do not explicitly engage with feminism. The paper goes on to identify evidence that suggest the existence of such framework within the works of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt, particularly in their themes of spontaneity and natality. This calls for an ontological reorientation of the concept of power to include the feminine conceptualization of power as the capacity for new beginnings beyond the traditional version of power as something exercised over others.

Keywords: dominance, hierarchy, spontaneity, natality, generativity

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1. Introduction

Encyclopedia Britannica defines power as “the capacity to influence, lead, dominate, or otherwise have an impact on the life and actions of others in society.”[1] German Sociologist, Max Weber, in his work, *Economy and Society*, defines power as the ability, “to carry out one’s will even against resistance”. These imply power as having command over others. Weber then goes on to define domination as the probability that a command will be obeyed by a group of people.[2] Thus, the concept of power appears closely link with domination. As power is defined in terms of the ability to secure compliance, it occupies a foundational place within political theory. Early modern formulations of sovereignty such as in the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes emphasizes on sovereign command i.e., command backed by coercive authority. This closely aligns with the idea of power as dominance. Even in reading Karl Marx, in the concept of control over means of production and the ability of one class to dominate another, may imply aspect of power that can be interpreted as domination.[3] What unites these otherwise distinct accounts is a shared a model aimed at compliance and outcome. These understandings of power do not indicate conceptual neutrality.

2. Power as Phallocentrism

The dominant conception of power within political theory may be characterized as phallocentric insofar as it is structured by a logic that privileges control, domination, and hierarchy. Here, phallocentrism does not imply a literal association with male bodies but rather a symbolic orientation where power is associated with penetration, control, and secured through dominance. In *The Sexual Contract*, Carol Pateman argues that the original pact for the creation of civil society contains sexual as wells as social contract. This sexual contract secures the political and sexual rights of men over women.[4] The social contract conceals a prior patriarchal agreement that institutionalizes male authority over women and is structured through gendered relations of subordination. Wendy Brown extends this argument by proposing that contemporary political discourse continues to reproduce these assumptions.[5] Power as something possessed, exercised, and defended by sovereign subjects presupposes a masculinist model of self-sufficiency and control.

The prevailing conception of power as dominance can render non-assertive models weak and ineffective. This may partly explain the historical difficulty within political theory to account for forms of collective action that are non-hierarchical and contingent. Recognizing phallocentric tendencies within dominant power frameworks can help understand the limits of political thought and the need for an ontological reorientation of power.

3. The Need for Re-conceptualization

The need for ontological reorientation of fundamental political concepts is best argued by Hannah Arendt. Arendt, in *Between Past and Future*, argues that political theory had relied on a set of inherited concepts that have traditionally provided a framework for understanding political life. These concepts have given relatively stable language through which political phenomena could be interpreted. But as these solutions have become unreliable as they had emerged from specific historical contexts that no longer exist.[6] The crises of modernity thus necessitate a critically rethinking of the fundamental concepts of political theory. Following this line of reasoning, the concept of power must be subjected to similar scrutiny. If dominant understandings of power are structured by phallocentric assumptions of domination and hierarchy, it can fail to capture the full range of political phenomena. It requires reconceptualization to account for more contingent, and non-hierarchical forms of political action.

Amy Allen argues that power must be understood not only in terms of domination but also through resistance, solidarity and collective character.[7] One such alternative model to phallocentrism could be a feminine visualization of power. Contrary to phallocentric models that associate power with hierarchy and the capacity to impose one’s will, a feminine framing seeks to understand power as something that emerges through interaction, cooperation, and collective processes. The “feminine” here is an attempt to refer to the conceptual orientation that emphasizes creation, relationality, and non-domination rather than biological sex or sexual attributes. It indicates priority over the productive and generative dimensions of political life that allows a rethinking of political agency as capacity to sustain common worlds.

4. Women and Power

Feminist standpoint theorist, Nancy Hartsock, in her work, *Money, Sex and Power* argues that in theorizations of power formulated by women thinkers, there suggest evidence of common inclination to move away from analyses of domination and to attempt other meanings associated with ability, capacity and competence.[8] In the work, Nancy discusses the feminine nature of Hannah Arendt's retheorization of power.[9] Despite strict separation of the private and the public in Arendtian version of politics, which may make Hannah Arendt problematic for feminist theorization, feminists have found applicability of Arendtian frameworks within feminism.[10] The retheorization of power as action in concert in one such framework.

Arendt in her discussions of the human condition, begins with the concept of natality rather than mortality, which had dominated the Western tradition. Natality signifies the capacity to initiate the unprecedented and marks a break in deterministic chains to introduce contingency into the human world. This capacity to initiate the unprecedented is performed through action.[11] As action is event of beginning itself, it corresponds directly to natality. This beginning is again linked to inseparable from plurality. Natality cannot manifest in isolation. It requires a space of appearance where distinct actors encounter one another. In this sense, natality is relational, it becomes political only insofar as it is enacted in a shared world.

This Arendtian understanding of natality can be read as an ontological reconfiguration of power. Contrary to the tradition that conceive power in terms of sovereignty, command, or domination, Arendt locates it in the collective enactment of beginnings. Power does not come from control over outcomes but from the capacity of actors to initiate and sustain relations through action. Arendt rejects the understanding of power as effectiveness of command as it does not distinguish between power, strength, force, authority or violence. "If effectiveness of command, the man with the gun has it." [12] Arendt argues that although power and violence are often found together, they are opposite and where one rules, the other cannot appear. As violence destroys community, Arendt views it as a denial of the possibility of political action.

Power on the other emerges when people come together and act in creating a community. As it comes with the creation of purpose of the community, it is the "glue" that holds community together. Power, Arendt argues, like a constitution of the polis, enables the individual to overcome his individual death. When faced collectively, individual death is accompanied by potential immortality of the group.[13] It appears that in the Arendtian concept of natality, power is redefined in terms the capacity for new beginnings and empowerment rather than something exercised over others. Natality re-theorizes power as a non-sovereign, non-instrumental conception of politics, which may be interpreted as a framework that moves away from traditional phallogocentrism.

One surprising figure of influence in the thinker's life was Marxist revolutionary theorist, Rosa Luxemburg. Margret Canovan even goes as far to refer to Luxemburg as a hero for Arendt.[14] This is in spite of Hannah Arendt's distance from Marxist ideological framework. Arendt may have felt an affinity for Luxemburg due to the similar social circumstances. They were Jewish woman operating in a predominantly male milieu. Luxemburg and Arendt also explicitly rejected engagement with public feminism. This can make it difficult to interpret their works in a feminist angle. However, despite their distance from feminism, both proposed frameworks of emancipatory politics that encouraged plurality and freedom, which later theorists such as Raya Dunayevskaya, Bonnie Honig and others have used in various branches such as in Marxist feminist theory and critical feminist theory. [15]

There indicate clear points of affinity with the thought of Luxemburg across many writings by Arendt. The most explicit of which may be in their analyses of imperialism. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg theorizes imperial expansion as an intrinsic requirement of capitalist accumulation, driven by the need to incorporate non-capitalist territories. Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* calls it, "Luxemburg's brilliant insight"[16] and similarly treats imperialism as a result of capitalism and links it to the emergence of total domination. The concept of plurality may be another point of resonance. Plurality refers to the presence of distinct actors whose differences necessarily generate disagreement and contestation.

Thus, plurality may be interpreted as space for dissent. Hannah Arendt describes freedom as "freedom of dissent"[17]. This bears similarity to Luxemburg defining freedom as, "freedom for the one who thinks differently"[18]. It appears that for both thinkers, politics arises from the interaction of diverse perspectives rather than uniform consensus, thus making dissent intrinsic to politics.

Dissent as a resistance to hierarchical and dominating forms of power that seek to suppress difference may be interpreted as a challenge to phallogocentric models of power that privilege control, linearity, and domination. Preservation of freedom of dissent ensures that no single perspective can fully subsume others. When plurality is sustained through the presence of dissent, it can enable a form of collective politics that is open ended and resistant to domination. It may be interpreted as a non-dominant understanding of power as arising through interaction rather than imposition, which may prevent the reduction of politics to instrumentality or administrative order.

Perhaps the most conceptually suggestive link is between the Arendtian concept of natality and the spontaneity of Luxemburg. Spontaneity refers to the capacity of political movements to begin unpredictably from the lived experience of the masses rather than from directives of organized leadership. Natality, similarly, names the human capacity to begin anew i.e., to initiate action that is not predetermined by prior conditions. The different frameworks of the thinkers cannot be overlooked. Luxemburg positions spontaneity within revolutionary praxis but Arendt situates natality within an ontological account of the human condition. However, both it appears that natality and spontaneity work on the same core principle: the possibility of the new beginnings. This reconceptualization of power as power of new beginnings rather than dominance over others can help draw up a non-sovereign, non-instrumental conception of politics, which can help in political ontology to move away from traditional phallogocentrism.

The ontological affinities between Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt thus can be drawn out along three interrelated dimensions of power: First, both articulate a conception of power that does depend on the control of outcomes.

Luxemburg argues that political action, especially in its mass, collective form, cannot be fully directed and resists centralised command. Similarly, Arendt's account of action emphasises its boundlessness and unpredictability. Once initiated, action enters a web of relations where consequences cannot be controlled. Thus, power is not measured by the capacity to secure determinate ends, but by the ability to initiate processes whose trajectories remain open. Second, power is fundamentally relational. For Luxemburg, power emerges through processes of interaction and coordination of the self-activity of the masses rather than in the authority of a party apparatus. Arendt also sees power as arising in concert. i.e., between people, in the space of interaction constituted through speech and action. Both thus seem to conceptualize power as something that is sustained through collective engagement rather than possessed by an individual or institution. This can displace sovereign models of power and to situate it within networks of interaction rather than structures of domination. Third, both thinkers theorize power in terms of its generative potential. More than dissent and opposition, power appears to be the potential production of new realities. Non-hierarchical and spontaneous revolutionary politics may be interpreted as generative in that it brings forth new forms of collective life through struggle. Similarly, Arendtian action arising from natality frames power as the capacity to begin. In this sense, power is inherently creative: it opens up new political possibilities rather than simple negation of existing structures. Taken together, these elements can indicate an ontological affinity even among non-feminist women thinkers. Women theorists, particularly Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt, in conceptualizing power appear to reframe it as non-sovereign, relational, and generative, defined by the capacity to act in concert and bring something new into being rather than through domination. Adoption of such frameworks of power against existing phallogocentric and dominance-based frameworks to generate a new ontology of power better attuned to the complexities of contemporary multicultural and diverse societies of today.

5. Conclusion and Relevance

This study can help contribute in expanding existing frameworks of power to be more inclusive, non-dominant and non-hierarchical.

The reconceptualization of power as power of new beginnings rather than dominance over others can help draw up a non-sovereign, non-instrumental conception of politics. Such a reconceptualization has implications for moving political ontology beyond traditionally phallogocentric frameworks of power.

At the same time, the analysis suggests that despite operating within distinct theoretical traditions women thinkers, including those outside explicitly feminist theory, often converge in conceptualizing power in non-dominating terms. This may point toward structural affinities in the lived experience of the feminine gender that shape this orientation toward non-dominant and generative power. Formulations of power as generative and relative are significant in extending the conceptual limits of political theory as it could providing a more adequate framework for understanding non-hierarchical and collective forms of political action. This could be helpful in providing alternate theories of power that extends beyond traditional phallogocentric limitations and may provide a more adequate framework for understanding non-hierarchical collective actions within political theory.

6. Limitations

The study does not engage with a relatively small number of male thinkers who conceptualize power in non-dominating terms, here described as a "feminine" conception of power, nor does it examine the biographical or intellectual standpoints that may have informed such perspectives. This remains an area for further research.

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Footnotes

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<https://www.britannica.com/topic/power-political-and-social-science>.
- [2] Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Roy Bailey et al. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 53.
- [3] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651st ed. (Penguin Classics, 2017); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; Penguin Classics, 2002).

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