

BOOK REVIEW

The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind

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In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler presents what she refers to as “aggressive nonviolence” as an ethical response to structural and state violence, and the individual violent acts to which they give rise and legitimize. Collectively, these forms of violence can be categorized as oppressive: they are effects of and in turn function to mask, reproduce, and enforce harmful structures and patterns of inequality within society. Given the focus and scope of Butler’s analysis, her book will be of interest to scholars and teachers of social and political theory and philosophy, philosophy of race and racism, and gender studies.

Butler begins her introduction by providing an overview of oppressive violence. In doing so, she makes clear that the scope of her analysis is not limited to individual physical or embodied acts (the striking of “a blow”) but rather also considers the broader sociopolitical context within which such acts occur. “Sometimes,” Butler writes, “the physical strike to the head or the body is an expression of systemic violence, at which point one has to be able to understand the relationship of act to structure, or system” (2). She shows that whereas oppressive violence is normatively framed in ways that legitimize it and the structures and patterns of inequality it reproduces, protest and resistance against this oppressive status quo are themselves framed as violent and therefore cast as illegitimate or even criminal, and movements for emancipatory social change are duly repressed. “Exercising rights of assembly is called a manifestation of ‘terrorism,’ which, in turn, calls down the state censor, clubbing and spraying by the police, termination of employment, indefinite detention, imprisonment, and exile” (5).

Butler understands why some on the left call for counter-violence in the face of this fraught sociopolitical context. At the same time, she problematizes the views that violent resistance is sometimes required within a violent context, and that violence is justified for purposes of self-defense, on the grounds that neither perspective sufficiently acknowledges the interconnected nature of existence. “If the self is constituted through its relations with others,” she writes, “then part of what it means to preserve or negate a self is to preserve or negate the extended social ties that define the self and its world” (9). Butler does acknowledge that counter-violence may be necessary to dismantle oppressive regimes, but she nonetheless contends that this argument only holds to the extent that meaningful distinctions can be drawn between “the violence of the regime” and “the violence that seeks to take it down” (13). She also worries about containing violence once it has been unleashed and, therefore, that counter-violence may simply increase violence overall.

Butler concludes the introduction with a preliminary account of aggressive nonviolence. Distinct from pacifism, nonviolence is not an absolute principle but rather an

aspirational ideal affirming equality and freedom. Ultimately, nonviolence for her “is perhaps best described as a practice of resistance that becomes possible, if not mandatory, precisely at the moment when doing violence seems most justified and obvious . . . it can be understood as a practice that not only stops a violent act, or a violent process, but requires a form of sustained action, sometimes aggressively pursued” (28).

In the chapters that follow, Butler establishes a relationship between nonviolence and equality, interrogates the question of grievability of lives to show how oppressive violence both reflects and reasserts systemic inequality, and elucidates an ethicopolitics of aggressive nonviolence. She advances her argument in large part through a psychoanalytic critique of traditional liberal ethical and political philosophical perspectives. Chapter 1, “Nonviolence, Grievability, and the Critique of Individualism,” invokes the notion of the grievability of lives to provide a “non-individualist” and therefore non-liberal, “account of equality” (29). As she also makes clear in *Frames of War*, for Butler grievability is an attribute that allows loss of life to be recognizable, makes possible acts of mourning in the face of that loss, and thus generally marks lives as a meaningful: if life had not been meaningful, then its loss would not be worth marking. As reflected in police killings of unarmed Black persons in the US, grievability may be recognized in one context but not another. That some lives are not grieved at all shows, moreover, that they were never properly recognized as lives. Such inequality of grievability pervades a social context characterized by precarity, a “politically induced condition” in which some lives are “differentially” and systemically “exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2010, 25).

Butler grounds the inequality of grievability, as well as the precarity that grounds and reinforces it, in liberal individualism. What liberalism presupposes as a fully livable life in need of preservation and protection, she shows, is not neutral. Rather, it is first and foremost human, as well as adult, male, and white (as well as cisgender and heterosexual). This configuration casts other lives as not fully livable, or as not lives at all but rather, as she puts it in *Frames of War*, “something living that is other than life” (Butler 2010, 15). Neither less than fully livable lives nor “things that are merely alive” are worth preserving and protecting, or at least they are not worth troubling ourselves to preserve and protect. Violence against such entities does not therefore register as a violation, and their elimination is not considered a loss; they are in effect expendable.

A context in which violence is not recognized as such, “where lives vanish from the realm of the living before they are killed,” constitutes a “destructive imaginary” that must be combatted in ways that do not “[replicate]” its “destructiveness” (64). Following upon her critique of the liberal autonomous subject, Butler thus expands her alternative theoretical framework in chapter 2, “To Preserve the Life of the Other.” Here, she critiques both deontological and consequentialist ethics from the perspective of psychoanalysis. In her view, liberal ethics posits that “reversibility”—imagining what the effects would be on myself if the other engaged in a particular action—both inhibits the commission of harm against others and motivates preservation of their lives. As merely individualistic, however, this perspective ignores the conditions for the possibility of that inhibition and preservation. It therefore cannot account for “the destructive potential that is a constitutive part of social relations” (86). Psychoanalysis posits, in contrast, that although we resent the interconnectedness with and especially the dependency upon others that characterize our shared existence, disavowing interconnection and dependency *à la* liberalism simply leaves in place conditions that foster aggression, violence, and thus even our own destruction. “[T]he ‘I,’”

Butler writes, “lives in a world in which dependency can be eradicated only through self-eradication” (99). Although psychoanalysis recognizes this fact, Butler argues in chapter 4, “Political Philosophy in Freud: War, Destruction, Mania, and the Critical Faculty,” that Freud’s attempt to contain aggression through turning it against itself by means of the superego also threatens to destroy the “I.” In her view, then, violence must be countered from a stance of ambivalence. We preserve the life of the other, she contends in chapter 2, not because they are “like us,” but rather because we recognize that even though we are different, our existences are nonetheless bound up with and thus depend upon one another. In chapter 4, Butler explores the potential of mania not as a ground for an alternative ethics, but as having the potential to generate conditions for the possibility of one. She observes that although mania possesses its own destructive potential, as a rejection of reality it nonetheless performs a kind of critical disruption of the status quo that opens up a space within which alternatives, such as an ethics of aggressive nonviolence, might be developed.

Chapter 3 moves to thinking specifically about “The Ethics and Politics of Nonviolence.” Butler begins by drawing upon the work of Fanon and Foucault to show how the biopolitics of racism functions to position, on the basis of their racialized embodiment, Black lives as ungrievable and thus to differentially subject those lives to structural and individual acts of violence. Given that racist violence grounds, pervades, and is reproduced through fundamental social structures and institutions, she proceeds to argue that such structures and institutions, including the law, cannot be relied upon to combat racism and racist (state) violence.

In light of this insight, Butler turns to Walter Benjamin’s essay, “Critique of Violence” (Benjamin 1996). She both elaborates on law’s interconnection with violence and contends that Benjamin offers conceptualizations of violence that do not merely lead to the reproduction of its state and institutional (that is, oppressive) forms. Specifically, she presents divine violence as Benjamin conceives of it as functioning in a manner analogous to that of mania: directed at other (specifically oppressive) forms of violence, it is simultaneously critical and ambivalent. Destroying the violence of the law as well as undermining the conditions for its possibility, divine violence opens onto the possibilities for generating alternative conditions that might be devoid of violence, or at least within which it can be minimized. Given its nature and function, divine violence is in Butler’s view effectively nonviolent. Failure to acknowledge this and therefore to sufficiently distinguish it from the violence of law, she argues, keeps intact conditions for the possibility of oppression and the oppressive violence upon which it relies. “[R]adical critical inquiry into the legitimating grounds for a legal order can be called a ‘violent act,’” Butler writes, but “that accusation . . . works to suppress critical thought and ultimately serves the purposes of legitimating existing law” (137). She concludes the chapter by addressing how oppressive power frames the “nonviolent violence” of critique as itself a manifestation of oppression for the purposes of undermining its efficacy.

In many ways, the arguments presented in *The Force of Nonviolence* are even more relevant now than when the book appeared in 2020. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has brought systemic inequality of grievability into stark relief. Globally, this inequality is apparent in the vastly unequal distribution and availability of Covid-19 vaccines. Within the US, it is apparent in the willingness to sacrifice the elderly, the immunocompromised, and Black and Brown persons to the virus. The world is also experiencing a major new outbreak of violence in the form of the war in Ukraine. In the US, violent crime, especially within impoverished communities where it is left to

flourish, has increased. Police violence against communities of color continues unabated. There have been mass shootings in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas, the former of which was motivated by racism. Backlash against #MeToo has unleashed overt misogyny, and the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ+ persons are under renewed attack. Trump supporters violently attacked the US Capitol in an effort to prevent a peaceful transfer of political power. This current reality is one that calls for careful yet pointed analyses like Butler's, which facilitate understanding of the nature and function of, and thus more effective resistance against, structural and state violence and the violent individual acts to which they give rise, legitimize, and proliferate.

At the same time, Butler's appeal to nonviolence looks different in the shadow of what has transpired since 2020. Our current reality also raises questions concerning rejecting or even deeply curtailing the use of counter-violence; doing so may be appropriate and necessary in some contexts but not in others. Critical analysis is thus needed of different contexts in their specificity, of the distinction between counter-violence and oppressive violence, as well as of points of intersection between counter-violence and aggressive nonviolence. Like aggressive nonviolence as Butler conceives of it, counter-violence can also be seen to disrupt and disable acts of oppressive violence and in doing so undermine the conditions for their possibility. As an action undertaken in opposition to oppression, moreover, counter-violence may reflect a commitment to freedom and equality.

Existential and phenomenological philosophers address, but come to different conclusions about, many of the issues Butler addresses, including the use of counter-violence. Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir share Butler's view that, living in a shared world, we cannot control how we affect and are affected by others; this fundamental character of existence is what Butler refers to as precariousness and Beauvoir as encroachment. For all three thinkers, such lack of control portends conflict that always has the potential to become violence that may in turn function in the service of oppression. Whereas Butler sees this reality calling for (aggressive) nonviolence, Arendt and Beauvoir see it calling for ongoing critical examination of and engagement with current reality in the manner I describe above. They see violence as a human capacity, not because human beings are inherently violent, but rather because violence is an unavoidable aspect of human existence. Denying or suppressing it within certain lives, especially in situations of oppression where it is, in their views, not only a necessary but also an ethical response, effectively casts those lives as less than fully livable, or even as merely things that are living. Violence, Arendt contends, is a "*human emotion*," the denial of which is "nothing less than" dehumanizing; moreover, "under certain circumstances violence . . . is the only way to set the scales of justice right again" (Arendt 1970, 64). Observing that the suppression of women's capacity for violence is a hallmark of their oppression, Beauvoir describes violence as "the authentic test of every person's attachment to himself, his passions, and his own will; to radically reject it is to reject all objective truth, it is to isolate one's self in an abstract subjectivity" (Beauvoir 2011, 343). Arendt's and Beauvoir's work thus points to and calls for critical analysis of how the oppressive power that renders some lives not fully livable and grievable reproduces itself, and the conditions for its possibility, in part through denying or delimiting or pathologizing the capacity for violence in already oppressed groups.

To be clear, neither Arendt nor Beauvoir sees violence as unambiguously positive. And on this important point their work coincides with Butler's. The work of all three thinkers reflects, albeit in different ways, the view that modes of resistance generated from a position of ambivalence are effective against oppressive power that would

use ambivalence to divide oppressed groups from one another and thus undermine and suppress aggressive nonviolence, and counter-violence, deployed in the service of radical social change and emancipation.

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