
Review

The force of nonviolence: An ethico-political bind

Judith Butler

London: Verso, 2020, x+224 pages, ISBN: 9781788732765

Contemporary Political Theory (2021) **20**, S95–S98. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00410-8>; published online 18 June 2020

For whom is *The Force of Nonviolence*? In its striking use of the pronoun ‘we’, this is a book that addresses not only philosophers but repeatedly conjures a global left. ‘If we hope to oppose state violence and to reflect carefully on the justifiability of violent tactics on the left’, Judith Butler writes, ‘there is no way to avoid the demand to interpret both violence and nonviolence, and to assess the distinction between them’ (p. 7). Attempting to meet this demand while purposely resisting definitions, the book moves ‘in the crosscurrents where moral and political philosophy meet, with consequences for both how we end up doing politics, and what world we seek to help bring into being’ (p. 7). These potential consequences are critical, as they raise the question of praxis and supplement the case Butler makes for ‘global obligations of nonviolence’ (p. 200).

Violence assaults, Butler says, ‘the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world’ (p. 25). Oscillating between the *is* and the *ought*, the ontological and the normative, the book’s performative argument unfolds in four chapters and a postscript. Already in the introduction, Butler advances her key claim that ‘selves are implicated in each other’s lives, bound by a set of social relations that can be as destructive as they are sustaining’ (p. 9), making it necessary to understand ‘the idea of selfhood as a fraught field of social relationality’ (p. 10). In fact, a central proposition of the book is that ‘violence done to another is at once violence done to the self, but only if the relation between them defines them both quite fundamentally’ (p. 9). Butler appears to think that this is the case: social relations ‘define’ subjects, ontologically and normatively, at once. Thus, while ‘a prior social relation’ is said to exist between subjects contemplating violence towards each other (p. 9), she posits nonviolence as a way of ‘affirming the normative aspirations that follow from that prior social relatedness’ (p. 9).

Much depends, then, on the particular character of this ‘prior social relatedness’ that grounds ‘the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world’ (p. 25) along with its normative aspirations. If the self is always relational, defined by social bonds that bind, then one is left wondering, by the end of *The Force of*



Nonviolence, what constitutes, or does not constitute, a social bond, a bind that is, at once, actually prior and potentially global. More specifically, by virtue of which ‘social relation’ are all selves (to be) related across the world, in which sense is there an interdependent ‘humanity’ obligated to conduct itself nonviolently? One need be neither a liberal individualist nor ‘a closet communitarian’ (p. 11), whose imagined self consists of ‘me, my relatives, others who belong to my community, nation, or religion, or those who share a language with me’ (p. 11), in order to question what Butler means by (actual) social bonds and their (potential) global bind. After all, it is possible to participate in an ostensibly naïve ‘counter-fantasy’ (p. 45) of global obligations and be left with disagreements over their ontological formulation.

Part of the problem here is what, if anything, binds together humans as selves or subjects, their life, and their social world. For despite Butler’s warning that ‘we cannot take the human as the ground of our analysis’ (p. 59), a humanity that embodies a singular ‘psychosocial’ constitution appears as the formation from whose perspective, if not also for whom, Butler writes. The question of humanity is also pertinent because Butler formulates her main critique of ‘many on the left who argue that they believe in nonviolence but make an exception for self-defense’ on the grounds that their understanding of the self, ‘its territorial limits and boundaries, its constitutive ties’, (p. 11) is overly restrictive. Given this, one can ask how armed resistance movements (such as the women’s protection units in Rojava), which claim to act on behalf of humanity or humanitarian interventions, could be judged from the perspective of nonviolence. It is necessary to pose this question, since disregarding—in the direction of humanity—the self’s ‘territorial limits and boundaries, its constitutive ties’ embodied in familiar ideas of self-defense, would not only fail to get us out of the problem of (non)violence but compound it profoundly.

‘Once we see that certain selves are considered worth defending while others are not’, Butler asks, ‘is there not a problem of inequality that follows from the justification of violence in self-defense’ (p. 11)? The charge of introducing inequality through self-defense is not incidental to Butler’s argument, because she posits equality as a function of (what should be) the equal grievability of life, which grounds her ‘thoroughly *egalitarian approach to the preservation of life*’ (p. 56, original emphasis). It is in terms of such equal grievability that Butler insists, ‘the ethical stand of nonviolence has to be linked to a commitment to radical equality’. This requires ‘an opposition to biopolitical forms of racism and war logics that regularly distinguish lives worth safeguarding from those that are not’ (p. 62). Yet, if all lives should matter without distinction (demographic, political, or otherwise), if all life is to be safeguarded and preserved, how does Butler’s demand for radical equality differ from a decidedly biopolitical project taken to the global level? How exactly would the ‘secular’ task of preserving life differ in its demands from



theologies that expound what Walter Benjamin (2004) criticizes as ‘the doctrine of the sanctity of life’ in its intimate relation to violence?

Indeed, Butler turns to Benjamin to stage her forceful critique of legal violence. Yet she does not ‘fully follow Benjamin to his anarchist conclusion’ (p. 136), which indicts the state and its law as necessarily violent. From the perspective of nonviolence, then, one cannot but wonder what prevents Butler from coming out against the state, its police, its prisons, its military, its remarkable organization of legal violence. After all, states do not merely frame as violent various forms of resistance, as she inescapably demonstrates. States are also the most lethal institutions of ‘death dealing’, to use Talal Asad’s (2007) designation. While *The Force of Nonviolence* affirms ‘mania’ for its capacity to introduce a vigorous ‘unrealism’ into ‘the modes of solidarity that seek to dismantle violent regimes, insisting, against all odds, on another reality’ (p. 171), the book does not appear manic enough in its avowed utopian horizon. In fact, it raises the question whether Butler is sufficiently mad at the legal violence of liberal regimes. She defends ‘mania’ only as ‘a cipher for understanding those “unrealistic” forms of insurrectionary solidarity that turn against authoritarian and tyrannical rule’ (p. 168), as if the legal violence of liberal regimes cannot, or should not, also occasion insurrectionary solidarities.

‘It should not be a struggle to secure the semantics for established nonviolent tactics of resistance’, Butler says before listing matter-of-factly examples of nonviolent tactics of resistance: ‘the strike; the hunger strike in prison; work stoppages; nonviolent forms of occupying government or official buildings and spaces’ (p. 139). But the examples she provides are disputable for their nonviolent categorization—as disputable as the violent classification of ‘those kinds of violence that are linguistic, emotional, institutional’ that do not take the form of physical violence, or what Butler calls ‘the blow’ (p. 137). What is nonviolent about a general strike involving healthcare workers, hunger strikes that demolish the body, sanctions that can impoverish millions, or the militant occupation of government buildings? The point is not that these actions are ‘really’ nonviolent or violent, but that nonviolence requires as much theorization and ‘struggle over semantics’ as does violence. The transparency of nonviolence cannot ever be taken for granted as ‘established’. When violence, as Butler suggests, is ‘the name given to those efforts to undermine and destroy prevailing institutions of legal violence’, whereby the name of violence ‘serves not so much to describe a set of actions as to enforce a valuation on them’ (p. 137), the same holds true for nonviolence. In fact, ‘nonviolence’ turns out to be Butler’s name for, and valorisation of, certain acts of refusal: ‘ways of refusing to recognize illegitimate authority’ (p. 139) and of refusing ‘the legitimacy of a specific form of rule’ (p. 140).

Yet a question remains about the legitimacy of other kinds of action and refusal that Butler may not so readily value as nonviolent, actions that are waged against forms of rule that pass too easily as legitimate authority. Openness towards what



constitutes violence and nonviolence, legitimacy and illegitimacy, is necessary to truly raise the problem of ‘sentiments of solidarity’ at a global level, that is, of ‘solidaristic sentiments of a non-nationalist sort’ (p. 177). If it is the case that ‘we must sometimes *aggressively* defend our lives in order to preserve life’ (p. 178, original emphasis), even as ‘we also have to commit to living with those towards whom we maintain intense feelings of hostility and murderous impulse’ (p. 178), the ambivalence in ethico-political judgement that Butler demands (p. 179) would need to address precisely those networks of ‘insurrectional solidarity’ (p. 182) across the world that may refuse the force of nonviolence. After all, for whom is *The Force of Nonviolence*?

References

- Asad, T. (2007). *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Benjamin, W. (2004) Critique of violence. In M. Bullock and M.J. Jennings (eds) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Ayça Çubukçu
London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2A 2AE, UK
a.cubukcu@lse.ac.uk