

On the Politics of Nonviolence

An Interview with Judith Butler

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Judith Butler's most recent book *The Force of Nonviolence* connects an ethics of non-violence to a forceful politics of equality. Reading it again from within the midst of a global pandemic, which continues to reveal deep structural inequalities in societies all over the world, sheds a new light on her words. The arguments have not changed, but Butler's critique gains gravitas. In this interview, Butler elaborates on some aspects of the book, including her recourse to psychoanalytic theory and the scope of her notion of *grievability*. She further remains clear about the role of critical theory in the context of Covid-19 and the recent uprising for Black lives: instead of jumping ahead to predictions of how this uncertainty might play out, she urges us to act from where we are.

Viktoria Huegel: You argue that nonviolence cannot be reduced to passivity, withdrawal, or quietude. Instead, you advocate “an aggressive nonviolence: one that emerges in the midst of conflict, one that takes hold in the force field of violence itself.” How can we understand the apparent contradiction of nonviolence acting *forcefully*?

Judith Butler: Perhaps it only seems like a contradiction. If we think that all force is violence, or that only violence is truly force, then a forceful form of non-violence is a contradiction. My formulation, one that draws upon the traditions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr, suggests that there are forceful and effective modes of action that gain their force precisely by refusing violence. We can think of force as strength, power, modes of effective transformation, none of which require violence and which, arguably gain their status as strength and power precisely by refusing to bring more violence into the world. The term “aggression” is central to the work of Melanie Klein and Freud, and it is also not the same as violence. Aggression can take non-violent

forms. In my view, there is no reason to relinquish aggression, but there is every reason to cultivate aggression into non-violent forms.

VH: You demonstrate that violence is a contested term. The determination of what counts as violent is not neutral and must be understood in the context of existing power relations. The breaking up of the protests in Gezi Park in 2013 is only one example in which peaceful assemblies are coined as violent to justify their suppression. Is there value in sticking to the conceptual framework of non-violence for a politics of radical equality, if the term itself is so radically contested?

JB: We are seeing now in Poland as the state suppresses LGBTQIA activists, or in Portland where the militarized police are unleashed upon non-violent protestors the activation of this very strategy to name non-violent protest as violence, a threat to security, even a form of terror. So a politics of non-violence has to sustain a critique of the way in which its own strategy is renamed and distorted by police and military powers in order to justify their own continued violence. That military violence also renames itself as “legitimate force” so we will need a sustained critique of how these semantic inversions work, and for what purpose. A politics of non-violence involves a critical analysis of how this inversion works without therefore falling into a form of paralyzing relativism. We cannot just give up on any effort to decide how those terms should mean; we have to struggle to establish their meanings.

VH: I find the notion of grievability difficult to grasp in this text. Does it work as a universal demand? And how does the temporality of the term function? It seems to connect the recognition of life to death understood as a future anterior. Does this not mean that the grievability of a person is only always grasped retrospectively? What inspires you to connect equality to this vocabulary of grief and mourning rather than, let us say, to a recuperation of equal welfare, or an idea of justice?

JB: Oh, you sound like an emissary from Nancy Fraser! I know that drumbeat well. My argument is that grievability is linked to both equality and justice. Consider the important political demands of Black Lives Matter against the ease by which black life is extinguished by police and carceral powers. To say that black lives matter is to say that their lives have value, and that they should be treated as equally valuable, that value itself should be equally distributed. Our ideas of distributive justice offer suffer by failing to recognize that grievability is unequally distributed. When Claudia

Rankine claims that the condition of black life is mourning, she is talking about a condition of living in which it is always possible to have one's own life extinguished, or to be faced daily with the prospect of losing other black lives that are close to you. These ways of living are the consequences of institutionalized racism, which includes the failure in the US to provide adequate and affordable health care to black and brown communities. We cannot understand discrimination – or injustice – unless we understand what it means to live a life that is, in the eyes of others, considered already dead, socially dead, or about to die, that is, subject to murderous police violence. Surely these ways of living as devalued and dispensable are crucial to understanding both equal welfare and social justice.

VH: The killing of George Floyd has sparked peaceful but forceful mass protests in cities all over the US and globally. His death continues a long list of Black people who have lost their lives to unwarranted and excessive police force. How do you understand your work to speak to this moment?

JB: You know, I am not sure that intellectuals should be so concerned with how “their own work” speaks to this issue. That leads us all to return to academic narcissism or modes of self-defence. At this time I think we should all simply and clearly speak to this issue, and continue to speak to it as much as we can. The forms of racism that we see in the US are deeply entrenched, and have continued from slavery to this day precisely through police and carceral practices that detain, harm, and kill black lives because those lives are either considered a threat to white supremacy or because killing has become a violent show of white supremacy. When we talk about “systemic racism” we are not only referring to explicit acts of police violence, especially murder, but other ways of “letting die” – and those include structural poverty, unequal access to health care, and forms of detention that, under Covid, turn out to be death sentences. I also think it is time to reformulate equality in terms of interdependence so that we can finish off the modes of pernicious individualism that keep us from understanding our fundamental social and ethical obligations to one another.

VH: The death of George Floyd has led once again to a man becoming the face of the anti-racist movement. In contrast, the death of Breonna Taylor, as is so often in the case of Black women and girls, happened outside the public eye and might have been forgotten were it not for being second to the cases of Floyd and Arbery. Is there a politics of gender at play in the way these tragic deaths

are reported on, and further how they are mobilized by protesters? Might this link to your account of grievability?

JB: It is true that the murder of the black man through suffocation is a social form that belongs to the history of lynching and continues in various forms of police action, including the chokehold and the knee on the neck. But I have seen widespread politicization against the murder of Breonna Taylor, and the black feminist presence in Black Lives Matter – which has been there from the start – draws attention to these other forms of violence, and those efforts have been effective in orienting the Left in its opposition to racist violence.

VH: At the beginning of *The Force of Nonviolence* you note that we do not have to – I would say we *should* not have to – love one another to be obligated to build a world in which all lives are sustainable. I guess this is why I find Hannah Arendt’s notion of cohabitation – which you often discuss – indispensable when thinking about politics. Politics for me has to start from the fact that we share the world with a plurality of people; those we love and those we might dislike, and most importantly people we feel no connection with. Yet you draw on psychoanalytic theory and more specifically Klein’s analysis of the mother-child relationship in developing an imaginary of interdependence. Is there not a danger in imagining cohabitation if it begins with dependency on someone who is close to us – the mother, the tribe, the community...? Does that not mean that we begin from our own identities and conflicts, rather than from the position of others?

JB: The use of Klein and Freud is meant to underscore the way in which individualism emerges through a denial of fundamental dependency. The temporal priority of childhood does not therefore make it into the philosophical foundation of a theoretical position. We would make a mistake by claiming that infantile relations form the basis of social obligation. And yet, one problem with the existing liberal conceit of individualism is that it denies all sorts of interdependencies, including the exploitation of colonized people on whom the colonizer often depends. The psychoanalytic vocabulary gives us the most nuanced understanding of aggression, but it is up to social and political philosophers to find out what implications that has for people who are not intimately connected. My argument against communitarianism is that it cannot elaborate the social and ethical obligations that we all have to those we do not know. Of course, we can love and hate those we do not know: we see that in political hatreds of various kinds. But my point is a more narrow one: the obligation to non-violence does not rest upon a loving relation to the other. It rests, rather, on the fact that no person can persist outside of a set of social relations,

arrangements, structures, and that as living creatures we also depend upon, and have obligations toward, other living beings and processes. This is not just a truth about infancy, but about social life more generally.

VH: Klein's account begins with an experience of dependency that changes form over the course of our lives. My concern would be that this installs a narrative which infantilizes our dependency on others and is thus haunted by a phantasmagoric moment of emancipation, an overcoming of dependency or, to put it simply, a growing up. How does this relate to vulnerability as a fact of existence rather than as something to be overcome?

JB: I am, as I suspect you read, opposed to that idea of emancipation. My understanding is that no one ever outlives the conditions of infancy. They follow us as adults, and adulthood on the individualist model, imagines that it overcomes dependency. I think this is a fantasy and a falsehood. Just because we remain vulnerable and dependent even as we act and resist does not mean that we are all children. It means that we carry forward the fundamental conditions of life as we move through time, and that developmental models based on a supposed emancipation from dependency and vulnerability are in denial of this truth.

VH: Throughout your work you argue that democratic change must work through civil society. The current health crisis however demanded state interventions on a scale that prior to that appeared unthinkable. Borders were closed, hospitals were nationalized, and universal basic income no longer seems like a utopian idea. Do you think it is time to rethink the role of the state for a democratic politics?

JB: I am not aware that I have said that democratic change should only work through civil society. That is actually not my view. I have in various places asked for more responsive government, made the case for electoral politics, and called for both a guaranteed national income in the US and equal access to quality health care. I have argued in favor of gender identity laws and engaged in debates about freedom of speech and the obligations and limits of state power. I am in favor of civil rights, and believe that these laws should be strengthened. What I oppose is militarized forms of state power. Yes, I am sure that other intellectuals have a more robust theory of the state – I learn from them all the time. But that does not mean that I am somehow against the state. I have argued, for instance, for a one-state solution in Palestine. I am also extremely worried about the fact that so many public services that should belong to a social democratic state have been outsourced,

privatized, and marketized, and I see that increasing number of people, especially under Covid, are suffering more and dying more often precisely because of a failure of states to honor basic public obligations. I am in favor of a democratic socialism that would guarantee shelter, education, and health care to all people. How an interlocking set of democratic socialist states can emerge, and what they would look like is precisely what we should all be thinking about right now!