

*The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, Judith Butler, Verso Books, 2020, pp209, ISBN 978-1-78873-276-5, £14.99 (hardback).

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The title of Judith Butler's recent book - *The Force of Nonviolence* - indicates the paradoxical defence of nonviolence central to this work. Rather than simply dismiss violence as an aberration, Butler's intention is aggressively to reroute violence in order to build equality and freedom. The commitment to nonviolence is a political decision, "not an absolute principle but an open ended struggle with violence" (p.56). We must, she insists, know our own destructive potential if we are to resist violence. High handed judgment of others that issues from those who assume they are free of such potential may replicate the very violence it claims to resist. This text does not invoke an ontology, an ethics, vulnerability, care - or even humanity - to ground nonviolent politics. Butler's utopic horizon asserts that all lives ought to be equally grievable. The ought is an intervention against symbolic, institutional and political structures that reproduce inequality. A relationality that is non-violent demands work, forms of political experiment that struggle against the psycho-social forms taken by violence. This succinct summary belies the complexity of Butler's argument. This is a book to celebrate and in my view to endorse. I am not going to perform the compulsive demand to demonstrate limits, work through contradictions, or immanently critique Butler's argument. Rather I focus on key questions the text inspired me to rethink as a tribute to its challenge. First, I outline Butler's practice of reading. She teases from Klein, Freud, Foucault, Benjamin and Fanon a potentiality often occluded in the reading of their work. Second, I consider her novel account of relationality as political. Third, thinking with her account of demographic biopolitics I argue that it allows us to think differently about democratic politics as improper, here echoing Benjamin's notion of divine violence. I conclude by returning to the politics of nonviolence.

The Politics of Reading: Butler practices a form of reading that rescues from texts a potentiality often overlooked. In so doing she unfolds her own argument. Here I reprise two examples, Benjamin and Freud. Butler takes from Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* the argument that neither violence, nor nonviolence, should be conceptualised as means justified by the ends they realise. Rather we should ask what world we are building - and affirming - when committing acts of violence. What is it that violence as a means, in itself, effects? (p.19). If Benjamin forces a reckoning with the argument that

violence is never merely a means to another end, his notion of divine violence breaks the vicious circle of law instituting and law preserving violence. The legitimisation of violence silently forgets, perhaps even justifies, the unjustifiable violence that establishes and maintains law. Political theorists often replicate reason of state arguments. For Benjamin the violence exercised by the sovereign cannot be justified - despite the ruses of reason and elaborate fictions that populate political philosophy. Social contract theories, as well as more recent versions thereof - Rawls' original position, Habermas' fiction of a future oriented promise of reason - all try to justify a founding violence that they cannot eliminate. Such fictions are better suited to science fiction. However, as ruses they are also forms of symbolic violence closely allied to the legal violence they justify. A criterion based on ends fails to ask if violence as pure means is justifiable in itself. An answer to this question demands a criterion within the sphere of means regardless of the ends. Divine violence escapes the repetitious loop of legal justification. Benjamin writes:

'Where mythical violence is law-establishing, divine violence destroys law; where the first sets bounds, the second wreaks boundless destruction; where mythic violence apportions blame and calls for expiation simultaneously, divine violence expiates; where the former threatens the latter strikes; where one is bloody, the other, albeit lethal, kills without bloodshed' (Benjamin 2009/1921: p.24.)

Butler reads this over-interpreted notion against its common rendering as 'purely destructive anarchism' (p.122). Reading with the critical patience she deems central to a nonviolent politics, Butler interprets divine violence in light of the one explicit reference to nonviolence in this text - nonviolent conflict resolution as a technique of civil governance, that does not require legal violence. As pure means, these are both a 'practice of critique and [a] mode of thought' (p.125). Benjamin later links this to a practice of translation, to an ideal of agreement wholly inaccessible to violence (p.128). This is not, Butler notes, a popular reading. The point though is not if Butler is right. Rather her reading of this and other texts opens onto moments when they hint at practices of nonviolence: '...this enhanced, potentially infinite modality of understanding that Benjamin elaborates as "conflict resolution" in 'Critique of Violence' may well be the resurgence of a potential in language that he began to elaborate in his earlier reflections on language and translation' (p.129). She avers, controversially, that the suspension of legal violence is precisely what is meant by divine violence, a practice that has no need of law.

In a similar vein, the critic may be surprised to see Freud invoked in the closing essay of the text - in defence of nonviolence. I have always read Freud's texts as forms of working through. Reading them closely is to get lost in an argument rarely resolved. Each of his essays opens onto further questions, as he constantly revises, rethinks and remakes his conceptual apparatus. If Freud's texts argue with themselves, struggle against the certainties that so many impose on him, Butler characteristically focuses on those moments that align with her commitment to a nonviolent. First, she rescues from *Mourning and Melancholia* the notion of mania as a form of disidentification that breaks bonds (recall Benjamin's characterisation of Divine Violence.) In the case of the self the bonds imposed by super-egoic constraint limit freedom, punish the subject rendered constantly guilty by melancholic fixation on the lost objection. Mania, in contrast, alludes to forms of solidarity that issue from disidentification rather than from a politics of identification. Mania is a practice of vigorous unrealism - an unrealism that resists the defeatist insistence that we cannot escape violence.

Butler celebrates the unrealism of mania. This reading of Freud is a subtle reminder of her earlier critique of the politics of identification in the works of Laclau. Laclau's focus is on the politics of identification found in group psychology, that place at their centre identification with the leader, or the empty place of the leader. Butler defends disidentification. In Freud's late exchange with Einstein, she finds an aggressive pacifism that focuses negative power against war. It refuses the articulation of negative power into new forms of nationalist identification. Butler's reading practice performs the nonviolence that she aggressively defends. Against the grain, her text emboldens moments when nonviolence peers from behind the blinds of authors who otherwise justify violence as an ineliminable element of human being-together. Butler contends that manic disidentification supports the democratisation of dissent. Moreover, Freud's letters to Einstein support her argument that 'negative power can become focused as an aggressive stance against war' (p.180). Freud here 'activates ambivalence in the name of critical reflection.' He rallies hatred against war.

The Politics of Relationality: Over the past three decades Butler has developed her account of relationality. In this text she spends some time rejecting political theories that begin with the individual. Such theories tend to assume a state of violence that the state resolves. This basic structure of justification characterises much political theory – the democratic state is premised on the exclusion of violence. The theorist imagines or describes a state of violence (a state of nature; capitalist society; instrumental reason) and uses this account to justify the legal state and its violence. In each case, the founding principle is one of universality, against particularity and unreason. Political order excludes animalistic violence in its commitment to a life of reason. However, as Benjamin notes, the violence supposedly excluded is reiterated as the reasoned violence necessary to protect the community against the threat of its own dissolution. Inclusion takes the form of the exception. At the heart of the democratic regime reason inscribes the violence it sets out to exclude.

In contrast, Butler argues that the politics of nonviolence begins with the assumption that we are relational, that the individual is from the beginning given over to the other. In thinking about the primacy of relationality, she puts paid to illusions of the possessive individual. The dead, matter, others, animals, the environment all participate in the complex that is the overdetermined plural world of relational appearance. Relationality is both subjective and objective, or rather it constitutes each in terms of relation, as exposed in relation. This relationality extends beyond the human - in order to live human beings rely on a set of infrastructures that make life possible. To affirm non-violence requires active attempts to establish forms of relation that are nonviolent. The point is to recognise this constitutive vulnerability in relation to the other and then to make an affirmative decision about living with others. Such relationality extends to other creatures, to the earth, to all of the infrastructural conditions that make life possible. We can do violence to other creatures, and to the non-living conditions that make all lives possible. The politics of relationality opens onto a substantive equality that recognises the consequences of historical violence in the present and the unequal exposure of many to vulnerability. Nonviolence is not a form of passive withdrawal. Rather, developing ideas first practiced by Gandhi, Butler conceives nonviolence as an aggressive insistent practice that is not violent. It takes many different forms. Commitment is required because relationality does not of necessity issue in peace. It is just as much the source of conflict and potential violence. Butler does not assume that because we are constituted in relation, we must act non-

violently. Rather, nonviolence requires commitment, an affirmation about how we want to live with others. We must know our own destructive potential in order aggressively to resist violence. Letting go of the body as a unity affirms our interdependency, yet also makes us aware of the conflicted bonds constitutive of the selves we become through asymmetrical and reciprocal forms of interdependency. In Butler's utopic horizon all lives should be equally grievable. This requires the never-ending extension and reworking of equality. The psychic and the social converge in the ambivalence and the disavowal that characterises all social relations. Two important points follow from this account. First, the notion of the human does not ground a politics of nonviolence. We are constituted in relations that extend to other living creatures, and to the earth that sustains us. Second, an ethics of nonviolence presupposes interdependency - but is not derived from interdependency. Rather, such an ethics is only realised in political struggle. We persist in the affirmation of nonviolence as a way of being together. Butler's relational model does not allow for symmetry. It renders the protagonists unbalanced, and the lines of flight from ontology into ethics and politics have constantly to be renegotiated and remade.

Nonviolence then is a political position. It affirms through institutions, practices and critique the equal grievability of all lives. This requires that we enter into dispute over the term 'violence'. Butler resists an easy relativism that would reduce violence to a nominalism, making its meaning the outcome of political dispute. As Butler notes, this argument reinstates a politics of violence by constructing nonviolence as just another participant on the battlefield. It cannot recognise the attempt to suspend the battle, to change the rules of the game. Nonviolence is not part of the same language game - it institutes a different game with different rules. Butler rejects too various leftist justifications for violence. As already noted, these arguments instrumentalise violence as a means to be employed strategically in political battle. They view nonviolence as just another strategy. They refuse to see that decisions about how we act in the world constitute ways of being in the world. For many on the left circumstances should dictate the right strategy, especially as violence is so common. This, we are told, is a properly materialist approach. It keeps violence as a strategy, on the table. Those committed to nonviolent political interventions are idealists. Worse, they are bourgeois liberals sipping good wine secure behind the walls that guarantee their peace. Butler rejects these arguments - but she is all too aware of of a normative violence that proclaims nonviolence here at the expense of others out of sight, over there. Her intention is to shift the frames that constrain our vision.

Demographic Biopolitics: In this light Butler develops a critique of what she terms demographic biopolitics. An affirmation of the conflicted bonds that tie us to others can all too quickly assume the form of a relationality that protects a particular community, or people. Identificatory forms of populism always run this this risk - even against their best intentions. The Brexit referendum, most notably in its leftist variation Lexit, intimates towards the dangers of such a vision. A demographic biopolitics deploys the exception as a measure to police and distinguish between populations. It relies on racial phantasms deeply ingrained in the history of supposedly democratic polities that silently justify repeated violence against black lives. Demography raises the question of how the demos is written, the forms taken by its graphic inscription. The history of such writing overlaps with a genocidal epistemology. The interpretive casing of the black body in such epistemic frames feeds the racial phantasms that are the symbolic counterparts to the racist murders that epitomise

American - and European - policing. A politics of nonviolence must contend with these violent legacies. If nonviolent politics is limited by borders, nations or other exclusionary imaginaries then in accounting for some lives, it sacrifices the lives of others. Such metrics of grievability, of biopolitical accounting, converge with the historico-racial schemas (p.121). Demographic assumptions write over the field of political relationality: 'Etymologically considered, demography is the study of the way that the people (*demos*) are written (*graphos*) or represented, and though it is sometimes associated with statistics, that is only one of the graphic means by which populations are discursively elaborated' (p.104). Here I want to gently push at Butler's argument. In the quote above she equates the *demos* with the people. I have argued elsewhere that the word 'demos' does not specify who belongs to a people. The words *demos* and *people* with their respective Greek and Latin roots are too quickly confused. Unlike other classical regimes – monarchy and oligarchy – democracy does not in advance 'specify' who counts as of the people. Josiah Ober writes that while '...the term *demos* refers to a collective body...unlike *monarchia* and *oligarchia*, *demokratia* does not answer the question 'how many are empowered?' (Ober 2008: p.4). The term 'demos' knows no borders – it is not immediately tied to one's place of birth, genetic make up, or supposed racial origin. In this sense, like divine violence that is always improper, democratic politics breaks bounds - in the name of equality. This equality cannot be limited in the name of a people. To equate democracy with a regime is to reduce it to a demographic accounting that is in the end arbitrary. It invariably justifies inequality. Democratic politics disrupts all orders according equal – not equivalent – rights and privileges to all. The utopic imaginary of democrats must not distinguish between citizens and immigrants, those who belong and those who do not. Recalling Butler's reading of the ideal of translation, we might argue that 'demos' is no longer a Greek word. Rather, its inappropriate appropriation by ongoing histories and practices of dissent against inequality is the focus of a nonviolent politics. Yet, it simultaneously recognises that the genocidal epistemologies are ever present.

Let me draw some conclusions. For Butler an active, political practice of nonviolence is aggressive. It is not a peaceful withdrawal from the world. It recognises that relationality opens up spaces for both psychic and social conflict. It counters these violent possibilities by rerouting aggression against violence. A nonviolent politics engages in semantic battles over the meaning of the word violence, insisting that symbolic, institutional, structural and physical violence, though distinct, all overlap. We might name and identify those responsible for femicide - but a nonviolent politics goes further. It illuminates forms of resistance against the symbolic and institutional legacies that shadow this violence. As Gago argues in relation to the international women's strike, such acts are transversal. They are not bound by nations. Neither are they bound by the immediate issues against which strikes are organised: '...[the strike] broadens the dimensions of conflict...[it] links violence against women and feminized bodies to forms of labour exploitation, police and state violence, and corporate offensives against common resources' (Gago 2020: p.17). These nonviolent practices know no proper bounds. Nonviolence extends to other creature, to infrastructures, fully aware of the ongoing destruction of the natural resources that are required by all lives. In Butler's concluding words '...whether we are caught up in rage or love - rageful love, militant pacifism, aggressive nonviolence, radical persistence - let us hope that we live that bind in ways that let us live with the living, mindful of the dead, demonstrating persistence in the midst of grief and rage, the

rocky and vexed trajectory of collective action in the shadow of fatality' (p.204). This text admirably testifies to Butler's own practices of nonviolent persistence.

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