
Beyond the Green Baize Table¹

A Review of Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: an Ethico-Political Bind*, Verso, 2020. 209 pp. £14.99 (HB). ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-276-5

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Introduction

At its most elementary level, nonviolence connotes the various ways and means through which violence is confronted and opposed. Conceived thus, any critique of violence, even one that explicitly advocates counter-violence, is engaged in a practice of nonviolence. To think of nonviolence simply as “...the absence of violence, or as the act of refraining from committing violence...” (Butler 2020, p. 27) is to fall into error. Nonviolence, rather, is better understood as “...a...way of rerouting aggression for the purposes of affirming ideals of equality and freedom” (Butler 2020, p. 27).

For those who feel that too many legal, political, social and psychoanalytic theorists of the last century have been seemingly content with a frustratingly opaque notion of what a practice of nonviolence might entail, Judith Butler’s *Force of Non-Violence* will come as a most welcome intervention. Focusing on Butler’s engagement with two prominent theories of violence (Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’) this book review highlights two particular achievements of Butler’s work, and identifies one important question that she evades. Section one of the review argues that *Force of Non-Violence* offers a way of reading Fanon which fully acknowledges the nuances and complexities of his account of the modes of force composed in the idea of decolonial violence. Section two suggests that in the idea of “radical equality” - the equal “grievability” of human and nonhuman life (Butler 2020, p. 75) - *Force of Non-Violence* exposes the flaw in Walter Benjamin’s seeming attempt to erect a neat opposition between the *preconditions* of nonviolence and its *manifestations*.

¹ The title alludes to Frantz Fanon’s example of how strategies of nonviolence were performed in the colonial setting within which he wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*. This and all other references to this work are to the Penguin edition, published in 2000 (see p. 48).

The concluding section argues that in spite of her acknowledgement of the central role played by “[r]acial schemas...in...debates about violence and non-violence” (Butler 2020, p. 115), and notwithstanding her sympathetic reading of Fanon, Butler fails to provide a compelling response to Fanon’s assertion that nonviolence “... is in proper parlance a creation of the colonial situation...” (Fanon 2000, p. 48).

Reading Butler Reading Fanon

According to Butler, “...violence is precisely what is perpetually subjected to an oscillation of frameworks that pivot on questions of justification and legitimacy” (Butler 2020, p. 138). The most pervasive of such frameworks is the “... historic-racial schema that makes it possible to claim ‘This is or was a life,’ or, ‘These are or were lives...’ (Butler 2020, 116). Few theories of violence have been as successful as Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* in laying bare the “...racial phantasmagoria to which some lives are figured as pure violence or as an imminent threat of violence...” (Butler 2020, p. 143). Further, from his involvement in the Algerian revolution, in which he was engaged as a physician and psychiatrist, Fanon was able to document various modes of resistance to the colonial state; duly acknowledging (especially in chapters two and four) that resistance requires “... a language, a media, a culture and intersubjective field of some kind” (Butler 2020, p. 105).

In *Wretched of the Earth* Fanon conceives of colonialism as “natural” violence, and, in so doing, draws attention to a violence that is so brute and all-pervasive that it “...will only yield when confronted with greater violence” (Fanon 2000, p. 48). However, from the outset, Fanon lays emphasis on the fact that physical force is just one of the means through which to “turn the scale” (Fanon 2000, p. 28) on the colonial situation. Other forms of resistance which the book contemplates are entirely consistent with Butler’s idea of a practice of nonviolence that is nonetheless “aggressively pursued” (Butler 2020, p. 27). For example, “extortion” is a mode of resistance that forces the colonial state into a position in which granting certain “concessions” to the colonised becomes unavoidable (Fanon 2000, p. 114). Moreover, in proclaiming that the individual who “...decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent” (Fanon 2000, p. 170), Fanon clearly recognises that decolonial resistance often takes purely discursive forms. A crucially significant mode of resistance, for Fanon, is marked by the far from passive decision of a colonised person to withdraw from the racial legal order. Thus, when colonised persons refuse to “... lift their little finger [or] in the slightest degree help the oppressor...” (Fanon 2000, p. 238), they are performing an important “duty...literally to make it so that the slightest gesture has to be torn out... [t]his is a very concrete manifestation of non-cooperation, or at least a form of minimum cooperation” (Fanon 2000, p.38). In short, following Butler, we might say that in offering a critique of the violence of colonialism, Frantz Fanon’s text performs *nonviolence*.

In *Wretched of the Earth* we have a text that quite evidently offers “...ways of living and acting...such that violence is checked and ameliorated, or its direction turned, precisely at moments when it seems to saturate that world and offer no way out (Butler 2020, p. 10).

The debt which Butler owes to Fanon is clearly acknowledged by her, but *Force of Non-Violence* is silent on a crucial point of divergence. Fanon determinedly refuses to align the decolonial practices he outlined in *Wretched of the Earth* with a practice or philosophy nonviolence. For Butler, nonviolence is, in essence, “... the name of an ongoing struggle” (Butler 2020, p. 23), which seeks not to bring about more violence, but to “...dispute the inevitability of its circulation (Butler 2020, p. 8). For Fanon, nonviolence is merely a new colonial idea (Fanon 2000, p. 48).

In the concluding section of this book review, I offer some tentative thoughts as to why two texts that for the most part speak in sympathy with each other should diverge on such a crucial point. There I suggest that Butler’s notion of nonviolence is vulnerable because of its heavy reliance upon a framework within which violence “... altogether fails to appear...” (Butler 2020, p. 14). This is a framework which Butler names “[t]he imaginary life...” (Butler 2020, p. 77).

Non-Violence: Its Preconditions and Manifestations

An important task of *Force of Non-Violence* is to expose “...those forms of violence, often structural and systemic, that too often elude direct naming and apprehension” (Butler 2020, p. 5). Inevitably, that concern brings Butler to a consideration of the law - a framework within which violence is frequently shielded from view. Whilst no “codified” or “discoverable” law can serve as the site for a practice of nonviolence (Butler 2020, p. 181), nonviolence is nonetheless connected to law in the sense of a “...rhetorical appeal...the petition to avert destruction” (Butler 2020, p. 181).

Although explicit references to law in Butler’s text are minimal, she does engage with Walter Benjamin’s analysis of three forms of violence in his 1921 essay ‘Critique of Violence’. In the Critique, law is equated with ‘mythic violence’; being no more nor less than historically acknowledged sanctioned violence (Benjamin 1995, p. 279). Two types of force are differentiated from law’s violence, and these have the power to “check” the violence of the law. Only one of these two forms - nonviolence - is relevant to this book review.² What Benjamin seeks to conjure in nonviolence is the idea of a society that has evolved to a stage where individuals can reconcile their interests peacefully without involving the legal system (Benjamin, 1995: p. 288).

² The other form is so-called ‘divine violence’ - a ‘bloodless’ force that brings an end to all law.

Of particular relevance to this review of *Force of Non-Violence* is that Benjamin's vision of an altered society appears in full view only if we hold on to the distinction he draws between the *preconditions* of nonviolence and its *manifestations*. Before a practice of nonviolence can emerge, the legal system must, in effect, be cleansed of its "mentality of violence" (Benjamin 1995, p. 288). "Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust..." (Benjamin 1995, p. 289) between persons are the *preconditions* of nonviolence. Once these preconditions are established, non-violence *manifests* itself in "...indirect" dispute resolution mechanisms; such solutions "...never apply directly to the resolution of conflict between man and man..." (Benjamin 1995, p. 289).

The distinction between the preconditions and manifestations of nonviolence is one that Butler steadfastly refuses to endorse. Indeed, time and again she insists that we see nonviolence as simply "...the political critique of violence" (e.g. Butler 2020, p. 147), and in that insistence Butler offers a more grounded, achievable, idea of nonviolence than is to be found in Benjamin's text.

At the core of Butler's attempt to articulate the form of relation between humans and nonhumans on which nonviolence depends lies "...the question of *whose lives* count as living" (Butler 2020, p. 67). To respond to such a question demands, among other things, "...a critique of anthropocentric individualism ..." (Butler 2020, p. 73), since the ethos of nonviolence which Butler seeks to inculcate "...presupposes forms of dependency and interdependency that are unmanageable or that become the source of conflict and aggression" (Butler 2020, p. 40). From these baselines, Butler builds the "normative position" that drives *Force of Non-Violence*: "...every life *ought* to be grievable..." (Butler 2020, p. 106). This normative position is named "radical equality" - for, as Butler is at pains to emphasise, "...a political defense of nonviolence does not make sense outside of a commitment to equality" (Butler 2020, p. 105). A practice of nonviolence is thus one which constantly draws attention to the fact that the structures, institutions and frameworks within which violence is debated in public life assume "...that some are more grievable than others...that the incalculable value of a life is acknowledged in one setting but not in another; or that within the same setting...some are acknowledged as bearing incalculable value, while others are subject to a calculation" (Butler 2020, p. 107). The frequent example offered by Butler of the lives which must *now* be recognised as grievable in a practice of nonviolence are the "[t]he thousands of migrants who have lost their lives in the Mediterranean...lives that are not deemed worthy of safeguarding" (Butler 2020, p. 120); "...migrant populations are ungrievable from the start...[t]hey are treated as beyond losing, already lost, never living, never having been entitled to a life" (Butler 2020, p. 121).

Colonial Violence and the Imaginary Life

As the first section of this book review demonstrates, Fanon's analysis of the forms of action of which decolonial resistance is composed - extortion, withdrawal and so on - conform to Butler's conception of nonviolence. But what is equally clear is that Fanon emphatically rejected the naming of these strategies as nonviolence. For Fanon, nonviolence expresses a willingness to come to terms with colonialism, not a determination to resist it. Nonviolence, then, is a colonial idea (Fanon 2000, p. 48), which is evident whenever there is an "...attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table" (Fanon 2000, p. 48). In the conceit of the "green baize table" we see the same tendency to reduce nonviolence to certain identifiable "indirect" dispute resolution mechanisms which we observed in Benjamin, but this alone does not explain Fanon's insistence that nonviolence is "...a creation of the colonial situation" (Fanon 2000, p. 48). Fanon's use of the words "idea" and "creation" in the context of nonviolence helps me to articulate the occasional feelings of discomfort I felt when reading Butler's work. Without doubt, Butler's conception of nonviolence goes well beyond Fanon's "green baize table", but, arguably, its *force* is too dependent on an "imaginary life" (Butler 2020, p. 77) that seemingly sits apart from violence, including the violence of colonialism. For although she frequently stresses the fact that violence "...is interpreted in the sense that... it appears differently - or altogether fails to appear - depending on how it is worked over by the framework(s) at issue" (Butler 2020, p. 14), violence *does not appear* in Butler's depiction of the "imaginary life" which "...turns out to be...a condition for the practice of nonviolence" (Butler 2020, p. 77).

For Butler, nonviolence demands a "...vigorous unrealism..." (Butler 2020, p. 171); an almost "manic" reimagining of our current political existence (Butler 2020, p. 171). For the once colonised, Fanon among them, this "counter realism" (Butler 2020, p. 10) - this capacity to endlessly invent - brings suspicion and fear (Tuit 2013, pp. 75-90).

References

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