Kent Academic Repository

Maglione, Giuseppe (2020) *BOOK REVIEW (2020) The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind.* Review of: J. Butler, (2020) The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind, London-New York: Verso, 2020, pp. 219 by UNSPECIFIED. Critical Criminology . ISSN 1205-8629.

Downloaded from

https://kar.kent.ac.uk/114601/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in ***Title of Journal*** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).

Judith Butler: The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind

Giuseppe Maglione

Critical Criminology
The official Journal of the ASC Division on Critical Criminology and the ACJS Section on Critical Criminology

ISSN 1205-8629

Crit Crim
DOI 10.1007/s10612-020-09535-z

Springer

Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Nature B.V.. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at link.springer.com".

Springer

Author's personal copy

Critical Criminology
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-020-09535-z

BOOK REVIEW

Judith Butler: The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind

Verso, London and New York, 2020, 224 pp, ISBN: 9781788732765 (HB), ISBN: 9781788732772 (PB), ISBN: 9781788732796 (eBook)

Giuseppe Maglione[1]

© Springer Nature B.V. 2020

Judith Butler's latest book, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind,* is a slender yet conceptually rich collection of essays animated by Butler's distinctive intellectual intensity and political engagement. It is a creative inquiry into nonviolence as an ethical and political exigency—one inextricably linked to the pursuit of social equality. In addition, the book's saliency rests on its ambition to contribute to ongoing struggles for social equality (including gender and racial equality).

In the Introduction, Butler sets forth her major proposition: appreciating nonviolence depends on understanding violence. This "understanding" is not an innocent epistemic operation but an ethical and political gesture. This is because "violence" is a contested concept—one that is always at stake in political struggles. "Naming violence," Buler claims (p. 5), is a political device which can enhance the power of those who control this practice. In fact, having the power to define certain behavior, person or group as "violent" means to condemn that behavior, person or group, possibly justifying their political oppression or elimination.

According to Butler, a value-free definition of violence/nonviolence is not only untenable but also—and always—a political decision. In alignment with this epistemic-ethico-political perspective, Butler proposes to chart those "political frameworks" (p. 15), within which violence is elaborated and justified, in order to deconstruct their internal economy and social effects. This critical endeavor is then complemented by Butler's constructive political effort—to put forth an ethico-political framework, predicated on interdependency, which legitimizes nonviolence as a never-exhausting tension toward equality.

The first target of Butler's critique is the Hobbesian social contract, assumed as the foundational source of a whole political imaginary, which hinges on violence as a pervasive *pharmakon*[1]—both problem (the *bellum omnium contra omnes*) and solution (the Leviathan's sword and crosier). Butler conceptualizes this framework, drawing upon

[1] In ancient Greek, this term means both "remedy" and "poison."

✉ Giuseppe Maglione
G.Maglione@napier.ac.uk

[1] School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

Published online: 31 October 2020

Author's personal copy

Melanie Klein, as a "phantasy" (p. 35)—a partly unconscious and socially shared mental representation that structures our modes of perceiving. In particular, Butler takes issue with the Hobbesian social contract and its individualistic and non-egalitarian nature.

Hobbes, in fact, presupposes self-sufficient, always adult and gendered (male) individuals constituting the polity, endowing the Leviathan with the right to violence to prevent the pervasive (yet potential) violence of the state of nature. Against this backdrop, Butler argues that "[n]o one is born an individual; if someone becomes an individual over time, he or she does not escape the fundamental conditions of dependency in the course of that process" (pp. 40–41). Interdependency between others but also with institutions, objects, practices, and structures is what makes life possible. It follows that, destroying "the other" means, at a level of phantasy, in the Kleinian sense, to "imperil one's own life" (p. 95).

Yet, this primary social bond, ostensibly modeled around the parent–child/love–hate relationship, is not immune from violence: "violent potential emerges as a feature of all relations of interdependency" (p. 105). Thus, the issue becomes how to reckon with such an ambivalence, without disavowing it (as Hobbes does), generating collective obligations to control the destructive potential of the social bond, while nurturing its creative power.

From this angle, Butler deconstructs (without denying, though) the most elementary justification of violence—self-defense. Her point is that "nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but an open-ended struggle with violence" (p. 56). In so doing, she leaves open the possibility of some unspecified conditions under which self-defense would be justified. Butler's focus, then, is on unpacking self-defense by asking what is a "self" and what are its boundaries. The "self" of self-defense is an individualistic entity—a category predicated on the Hobbesian disavowal of interdependence and defined on a "demographic basis" (p. 55). This means that the identity of those one is allowed to defend by recourse to violence are those lives written as "grievable"—registered as lives whose loss would matter and therefore ought to be safeguarded. The point, at once ethical and political, is to figure out the roots of the unequal distribution of "grievability" as a precondition of apprehending (and appropriating) violence—a theme that Butler developed first in *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* (2009).

Drawing on Michel Foucault and Franz Fanon, Butler sees the distinction between "grievable" lives and "ungrievable" lives as an expression a biopolitical-racial dynamic. Accordingly, it becomes possible to interpret the state-led disavowal of responsibility for the populations who are literally left to die (e.g., immigrants drowning weekly in the Mediterranean Sea or minorities killed by police chokeholds), as a racialized biopolitical decision, enacted as "necessary" violence and often justified in terms of preventive self-defense.

Is a "more just" law the way to redress those inversions and safeguarding the "ungrievable" lives? Certainly not, Butler contends. Here, in a compelling dialogue with Walter Benjamin, Butler engages in a critique of the legal instrumentalist justification of violence. Law is a product of violence and to use it as the regulative framework of violence—as if violence which becomes law would magically purify itself—is an irrational double bind. Instead, we should look at what Benjamin calls, in his *Critique of Violence* (1921/1996), the "technique of civil conflict resolution." This "technique" is not designed to achieve an end; instead, it is an end in itself that "exceeds both an instrumental logic and any teleological scheme of development—it is an ungoverned technique, arguably ungovernable" (p. 125). Such a "pure means" would elude violence by rejecting both the superimposition of an external end and any form of "legalisation"—that is, of co-optation by the state. When and where is this technique in action? How to implement it? "Language," Benjamin states, is the only place inaccessible to violence (p. 126). Butler interprets this cryptic statement

Author's personal copy

in light of Benjamin's work on translation: the task of translation is "furthering understanding where there was once impasse or even conflict," and its logic is the law of translation—"a pre- or extra-contractual technique of conflict resolution" (p. 127). Translation intensifies communicability, creating space for agreement—a space emptied by any justification of violence.

Nonviolence is this ethico-political operation of exposing which and how epistemic frameworks "legalize" violence as a means. In addition, it generates competing frameworks to intensify communicability by situating and naming practices of resistance (p. 147) which recognize/cultivate interdependency. But advocating nonviolence without supporting equality is a dangerous exercise, Butler claims. Equality, here, is the equal "grievability" of all lives: every single life matters exactly the same, and this is the "demographic precondition for an ethics of nonviolence" (p. 56). This means that the "interdiction to kill" entails addressing preliminarily the (biopolitical-racial) divisions between those who are considered living and those who are not, the constitutive ambivalence of the violent potential of interdependency, and the unit of analysis of such operations. Butler argues that, overall, this understanding should lead us to counter the biopolitical (preventive) self-defense, which authorizes the states to kill (or allow to die) entire populations that are deemed "ungrievable."

Butler concludes with a political proposal (p. 167)—one inspired by Sigmund Freud's notion of mania. According to Freud, mania is a revolt against the superego's unrestrained power (which manifests itself by introjecting violence to counter violence), aiming to interrupt the "vicious circle in which destructiveness is countered by self-destructiveness" (p. 167). Butler uses mania as an epistemic-political category: mania helps us to understand "forms of insurrectionary solidarity that turn against authoritarian and tyrannical rule" (p. 168). Although mania is not a political instrument, she claims, it "introduce[s] a vigorous form of 'unrealism' into modes of solidarity" (p. 171) against tyranny. This perspective is well illustrated in the postscript to the book, dedicated to the "*Ni Una Menos*" movement against "feminicidio"—that is, to the Latin American (now global) movement against the systemic-heteronormative violence predicated on the "ungrievability" of women's lives.

"*Ni una menos*" politicizes mania by the deliberate exposing of bodies to power, endangering (further) protesters' lives. The exposure of dependency, here, is not an impasse but a condition of productive, non-individualistic, social bonds. This tactic does not intend to create fixed "vulnerable identities" (as state agencies sometimes do in paternalistic ways) but to express a type of (nonviolent) strength against (violent) individualistic power, in a context where equality is demanded and the ambivalence of social bond acknowledged.

The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind is an untimely book—an intervention against our time—and one marked by nonviolence's minimal popularity and waning political currency. Butler tries to divorce nonviolence from its popular representations as "stoic" practice, highlighting its organic ambivalence (as already and always enmeshed with aggression) and its intellectual ambiguity (as at once a socio-political and psychic entity).

This also a critical book, aiming to uncover the condition of our present way of reasoning about violence and nonviolence, and deconstructing both instrumental definitions of preventive self-defense and left libertarian approaches to nonviolence as an unrealistic *divertissement*. While the book does not provide a rational justification for nonviolence, it reformulates the concept of nonviolence using Butler's key themes around the structure of social bonds, their psychic lives, and their ethico-political potential.

A number of conceptual and meta-theoretical dissonances make the book even more thought-provoking. The idea of nonviolence as something less than an absolute principle

Author's personal copy

renders the book's proposal pragmatic but also slightly ambiguous and normatively impoverished. The dialogue with Benjamin is fascinating and generative but, seemingly following Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, Butler cautiously disavows a confrontation with the messianic/anarchist import of Benjamin's "divine violence." Butler's insights around the destructiveness implied in any social bond are a key contribution, but there is little on how to govern it, apart from a line on "global obligations." Overall, the book hinges on Butler's well-known endeavor to cast epistemic, ethical and political spheres against a psycho-social backdrop. The result is the blurring of any divide between the normative, the psychic and the organic—between nature and logos—with continuous (at times disorientating) shifts from explaining to justifying nonviolence. Provocation here lies in the (deliberate?) chaos produced by these naturalistic fallacies, while marshalling the insights of Foucault and Fanon, Freud, Klein and Benjamin, thoroughly "bricolaging" their thoughts with limited philological and historical consideration.

Butler's voice is and has always been an exception to Roland Barthes' idea that the death of the author is (and ought to be) the birth of the reader. This is because Butler's lively *écriture féminine* does not conclude and cannot be enclosed; her generative (and sometimes dissonant) interpretations shake and provoke, galvanizing the reader more than soliciting acquiescent analysis. This is also the force of this book—an unsettling, inventive and provocative ride against the forces of our time.

References

Benjamin, W. (1921/1996). Critique of violence. In M. Bullocks and M. Jennings (Eds.), W*alter Benjamin. Selected writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926* (pp. 236–253). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*. London and New York: Verso.

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