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The Force of Non-Violence: An ethico-political bind

Judith Butler. 2020. London & New York: Verso.

There is more to violence than the physical blow, the rape, the verbal assault. Social structures are themselves violent, engendering and supporting discrimination and injustice, including systemic racism. An established argument within the political left claims (or used to claim) that we live and breathe within a pre-existing force field of violence and that believing one can freely adopt a morally superior non-violent stance is near delusional.

Judith Butler, a contemporary gadfly in the time-honoured counter-tradition of essential philosophers, begs to differ. In her latest book, a collection of four tightly-argued essays, she drafts her own version of non-violence, thankfully removed from the abstract, saintly stance normally associated with it and one that is wedded instead to an unambiguous political commitment to a notion of equality grounded in interdependence. For Butler, non-violence is not an absolute principle but an ongoing tussle with the very real presence of violence in society. It is not passivity, but an admirable way to channel our aggressive instinct. Non-violence means accepting aggression while choosing not to act violently.

The ‘force’ in the book’s title would be probably included in the meaning of *Gewalt* in German (that is, *Naturgewalt*, force of nature), a term used by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay *On the Critique of Violence* (2009[1921]) and normally translated as ‘violence’. In that sense, the force of non-violence also indicates the necessary violence (aggression) of non-violence, even though this very definition has been used manipulatively by authoritarian governments since the times of Max Weber to chastise peaceful demonstrators and, historically, to condemn disruptive actions such as work strikes, hunger strikes, sanctions, cultural boycotts, petitions and all the different ways of refuting unjust, inhuman and racist authority – Black Lives Matter being a case in point. ‘Force’ is a term pregnant with meaning: a Nietzschean/Deleuzean slant, not mentioned by Butler, would differentiate between the reactive force of state, government and police aimed at defending tooth and nail institutional injustice, and the active force of progressive movements, aimed at instating equality and justice.

Non-violence cannot be reductively defined as a ban against killing, nor can it be exclusively claimed by dubious political stances which favour an abstract notion of ‘life’ while deeming expendable – ‘ungrievable’ is the term Butler uses since her veritable tour de force, *Frames of War* (Butler, 2010) – the very real and concrete life of others. Consider the

pro-life movement: the existential condition of the woman (or the person barely living on constant life-support) is ignored in the name of a notional defence of life. Consider the right to exist movement: Israel's relentless and scot-free brutality against the Palestinians is sanctified in the name of 'self-defence'.

There are several interesting parallels with Walter Benjamin; in the aforementioned essay he confronts Kurt Hiller, for whom 'higher still than the happiness and justice of a particular existence is existence as such', seeing his principle as 'wrong, even dishonourable' (2009: 26). Privileging abstract existence (Dasein) over existents, that is, the concrete life of sentient beings, is incidentally Heidegger's dishonourable blunder at the very heart of his thought.

'Self-defence' is a case in point: who or what is the self evoked here? Who or what is defending itself against the alleged threat of desperate migrants dying at sea, against black people choked to death by police officers? It would appear that the net of relatedness this 'self' is embedded in is restricted to the lives of those who are proximate and similar, whose lives are deemed more valuable and more grievable than others.

This brings us to the question of interdependence itself, a key concept in Butler's current argument, one that is, I feel, insufficiently articulated. Central to the Buddha's teaching is dependent origination (if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist), a notion percolating into Western culture via the American transcendentalists as 'inter-connectedness'. In the process of translation, what was meant to be radical deconstruction of the self, a seeing-through its ephemeral, painfully non-autonomous nature, morphed into a Romantic paean of the unity among all things and of harmony between humans and 'Mother Nature'. The first stirrings of two profoundly naive stances influential today – namely, contemporary psychotherapy's 'relatedness' and our thoroughly anthropocentric romance with the wilderness – may be traced here.

What is missing in the notion of interdependence which Butler inadvertently subscribes to? *Anicca* or impermanence: the absence of an abiding self. Grievability, a formidable Butlerian notion, begins here: in life, or rather deathlife (*shōji* in Zen). My suggestion to ground her deeply ethical notion of non-violence in impermanence does not invalidate her plea. On the contrary, it makes it all the more urgent and potent: all lives are equally grievable because each life is unique. And each death, Derrida would say, is the end of the world as such, since each human being is the remarkable and unrepeatable origin of the world itself.

The book's subtitle is *An Ethico-Political Bind*: when assembling her more avowedly political argument, Butler converses in a compelling manner with the likes of Benjamin, Foucault, Frantz Fanon and Etienne Balibar,

building on their important legacies, rectifying, often persuasively, some of their stances. When bringing in psychoanalysis in order to discuss the more unconscious aspects of ethics, she relies (a little too heavily in my view) on Melanie Klein's hermetically sealed description of the psyche.

Butler's stance remains unique. Her work builds on post-structuralism and critical theory, injecting them with the urgency and passion of feminism, gender politics and identity, renewing and revising the often stale political discourse of the traditional left. She presented over the years a thoroughgoing critique of psychoanalytic intersubjectivity, particularly in relation to the work of Jessica Benjamin (Butler, 2004), building up an argument which contemporary psychotherapy would learn a great deal from – if the latter were open to question the normative ideal of relatedness (Mackessy & Bazzano, 2020). At the heart of Butler's argument was the notion that the therapeutic dyad is “an achievement, not a presupposition” (Butler, 2004: 146). Rupture and destruction are ever-present in the inevitably asymmetrical encounter and constitute the foundation for psychical transformation. Hegel's notion of recognition in the ‘I and You’ encounter between the Master and the Slave (crucial in laying down the first concrete foundations for a historically concrete self beyond the solipsistic perception of ‘me’ inherited by liberal and later neoliberal individualism) never overlooks struggle and conflict nor gives in to humanistic sentimentality.

There is phantasy and fantasy, Butler says, paraphrasing Klein's view of the psyche. Phantasy is unconscious, often setting the scenery for the frenzied phantasms of racism, homophobia, hatred of the poor and the migrants. Fantasy is understood as conscious aspiration, crucial both in fashioning a vision of origins (as in the so-called state of nature, whether the dog-eats-dog Hobbesian version or the noble wildness of Rousseau) and in forging a new imaginary for the future. This is no mere academic disquisition; without adequate (counter)-fantasy, there is no future for justice, equality and an ethics of solidarity.

Counter-fantasy is sorely missing in the contemporary political left, a lacuna expressively addressed in this book. The left is bound to lose again and again if it relies solely on old narratives and worldviews, especially when it is up against, for instance, the deeply-entrenched conservatism of English civic society. Jeremy Corbyn was subjected to a carefully and cynically orchestrated campaign of political assassination at the hands of a unanimous chorus of mercenary hacks, distinguished raconteurs of centrist hogwash *à la* Jonathan Freedland and the abysmally dull management consultancy project headed by Keir Starmer. With hindsight, the difficult question is whether the core of the project of profound and much-needed renewal behind Corbyn, for all its tremendous courage, ethical rigour and commitment, lacked a coherent counter-fantasy.

Butler's reliance on Klein is deeply ambivalent. Klein's stress on the inevitable tangle of love/hate in intimate relationships certainly rings true and it is valuable in inspiring an ethico-political project unfettered by credulity. Equally useful is Klein's view that you and I are to one another defective replacements for our irrevocable past. Yet the presence of the other is no mere projection; it is concrete, compelling, mysterious, painful, even seductive, to use Laplanche's (and early Freud's) unequivocal terminology – and the very basis for the creation of a radical ethics. An ethico-political project wedded to equality and justice cannot afford to ignore this aspect. Becoming aware of my phantasmatic projections onto the other is only one-third of the story. I must also realise and fully take on board the concrete presence and otherness of the other, and then attempt to respond adequately through ethico-political action.

Butler's parallel of the Kleinian view of the child-parent bond and the one between society (institutions) and the individual comes close to inadvertently replicating the paternalism of patriarchal and capitalist institutions she rightly decries. Where is the place for the inevitable, necessarily disruptive subversion of institutions if all we demand of them is to take care of us like children to their parents?

At the cusp of phantasy and fantasy is the daydream, the place where we can envisage either the beach underneath the street, as revolutionaries did in May 1968, or the sewers, as our cynical age arguably tends to do. Laplanche, summarily mentioned in the book, presents a far more nuanced view than Klein's and one that sits effortlessly alongside emancipatory politics and may go some way, if pursued, in developing a consistent counter-fantasy. In Laplanche's view, paraphrased by Butler, we are not dealing with a division between fantasy and reality but operate at all times within an organising psychic modality through which reality itself is consistently being interpreted. Paying close attention to the fantasies we create is crucial, and even more crucial is cultivating counter-fantasies outside the discriminatory, racist and unjust psycho-political structures we inhabit today.

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