

# Violence, justice and justification

Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020). 224pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 78873 276 5.

Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). 140pp., £35.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 1 50952 920 9 hb., 978 1 50952 921 6 pb..

Adriana Cavarero with Judith Bulter and Bonnie Honig, *Towards a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021). 192pp, £72.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 0 82329 008 6 hb., 978 0 82329 009 3 pb..

Jericho Brown begins his poem 'Bullet Points' with a vow:

I will not shoot myself  
In the head, and I will not shoot myself  
In the back ... and if I do,  
I promise you, I will not do it  
In a police car while handcuffed

His 2019 collection *The Tradition* comes back time and time again to the ways in which bodies are opened up to violence. Frequently, the lethal agent is the state. But not always. Later in 'Bullet Points', Brown's narrator describes other, more quotidian pressures that waste lives with the same finality as a cop's revolver:

When I kill me, I will  
Do it the same way most Americans do,  
I promise you ... so broke I freeze  
In one of these winters we keep  
Calling worst.

That police power, white supremacy and capital focus their collective attention on the same bodies is not a coincidence, of course. Yet although 'Bullet Points' depicts these forces shaping and ending lives with catastrophic immediacy, there remains something slippery and elusive about the violence they wield. The acts of coercive force that the poem describes reshape and deform their wider social terrain, making protectors out of murderers and shooters out of the shot. As a consequence, Brown's narrator often struggles to locate their centre, map their trajectory and point of origin, or identify the vulnerabilities that they exploit. Even grief must be accounted for within parameters set by the same institutions that make mourning necessary in the first place ('He took/Me from us and left my body, which is .../Greater than the settlement/A city can pay a mother to stop crying').

In May 2020, *The Tradition* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Less than three weeks later, Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd ('I promise if you hear/Of me dead anywhere near/A cop, then that cop killed me'), and the streets erupted. Like 'Bullet Points', last summer's global wave of protest often foregrounded specific instances of violence, but never at the expense of the wider ideological and socio-economic formations that enabled them. Their varied diagnoses and demands stemmed from a recognition that racism and white supremacy are not exceptional, but rather structure our worlds in ways that cut untidily across the scalar categories of 'local', 'national' and 'global'. The political calls that resulted – for police and prison abolition, for a full reckoning with the legacies of slavery and colonialism, for open borders, and much else besides – matched the scope of this critique.

To resist and dismantle these formidable institutions requires acknowledging what Audre Lorde described as the 'atavistic fear of an articulated power that is not on your terms'. Lorde was speaking about the 1973 case of Thomas Shea, an undercover NYPD cop who shot and killed ten year old Clifford Glover in Queens, New York City. The jury who acquitted Shea of murder contained a single Black woman and eleven white men. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde imagined herself in that woman's position. 'How do you take a position against them? How do you reach down into threatening difference without being killed – or killing?' How, in short, do you challenge a system sustained by and saturated with violence without opening up yourself (or others) to injury or death?

Many theorists, revolutionaries and activists have approached the problems of coalition-building, collective agency and structural transformation by advocating programmes of political violence. For some, it offers the surest way of undoing existing hierarchies and injustices,

while for others it provides a crucible in which new identities and subjectivities can be formed. Both positions are predicated on the belief that facing down ‘an articulated power that is not on your terms’ justifies and perhaps even necessitates the use of force. Yet Lorde’s challenge is not just to ‘reach down into threatening difference’, but to do so ‘without being killed – or killing’.

Three recent books have taken up Lorde’s problem, though they approach it from different directions and with different purposes in mind. In *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?*, political theorists Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings outline many of the arguments that have been deployed in order to condone or legitimise political violence. Frazer and Hutchings’ discussion of these justificatory schemes and strategies is animated by a keen awareness of the difficulty of pinning down precisely what violence is and how it relates to politics. Does the state practice ‘political violence’, or does it merely exercise ‘legitimate force’? If the former, then to what extent are the violent actions of those who exercise the sovereign’s authority and will theirs? Is Derek Chauvin’s unyielding knee his own, or is it the embodiment of a foundationally racist state and its murderous policing practices? Can it be both? If so, then where is the boundary between ‘political violence’ and criminality, if one can even be traced at all? And how might ‘good’ or ‘legitimate’ instances of violence be distinguished from their opposite?

Any attempt to justify political violence must work with ambiguities like these, yet as Frazer and Hutchings rightly note, violence is often taken for granted as a surgical instrument to be raised or set down as circumstances dictate. The right to self-defence, for example, presumes that one can take up arms in order to neutralise an external threat to one’s self, one’s family or one’s property. Once the balance of social order has been restored, one simply puts away one’s musket, pours out a glass and pulls a rocking chair out onto the verandah. Of course, self-defence has always been a ‘right’ from which certain (racialised, gendered, otherwise unruly) bodies are excluded, as Elsa Dorlin has pointed out in these pages (RP 2.05) and elsewhere. Even taking self-defence on its own terms, however, it must be acknowledged that social threats are not merely physical, and neither do they necessarily result from instability or breakdown. The measures taken to address them, moreover, cannot be

considered independently from the orders they preserve, maintain or restore.

If violence and politics are not mutually exclusive categories, then one cannot distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable instances of political violence using arguments that (for example) disaggregate society into a collection of rights-bearing individuals. Instead, violence is justifiable insofar as it is ‘necessary’, a broad category that encompasses Machiavelli’s insistence that political *virtù* can manifest itself in acts of cruelty, as well as Fanon’s embrace of violence’s creative possibility in a world in which the selfhood of the colonised is systematically denied. As Frazer and Hutchings note, however, Fanon also recognised violence as a force that generated extraordinary psychological strain and trauma among victims and perpetrators alike. It is precisely for this reason that its logic is so difficult to escape: if violence is simultaneously creative and destructive, then even instances that are apparently ‘justifiable’ are liable to fracture or even destroy the subjectivities they bring into being.

This sense of violence’s ambivalence informs Frazer and Hutchings’ turn to feminist theory in order to argue that ‘our ethical and political attention should be on the world that violence instantiates, as opposed to the world it is supposed to produce’. Because there is something overwhelming about violence, something difficult if not impossible to contain, ‘the world that violence instantiates’ is one that threatens not just this or that subject but also the intersubjective relations that sustain politics itself as a field of human activity. Political violence, they conclude, is thus wholly *unjustifiable*: it is predicated on an acceptance that some subjects can rightfully harm others, who must implicitly or explicitly be abjected altogether from the political field. It turns out to be a commitment ‘to something that cannot be made right’.

*Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* engages generously and insightfully with a wide range of theorists of political violence, and does so concisely and accessibly. While acknowledging that a short text of little over a hundred pages will inevitably be limited in scope, however, two omissions nevertheless stand out. The first is any substantive discussion of theories of non-violence, or what a politics founded on non-violent principles might look like. Frazer and Hutchings speak with clarity and conviction about the limitations of theories of political

violence, but their conclusion that ‘the ways in which political violence has been justified now and in the past fail, and that political violence can never be justified’ raises questions about non-violence that the book gestures towards without fully addressing.



The second concerns the role ‘justification’ as a discursive strategy plays in the practice of political violence. Frazer and Hutchings acknowledge the openness of their key terms, and make clear that ‘violence’, ‘political violence’ and ‘justification’ are not only contested terms in their own right, but also condition each others’ meanings. Nevertheless, their critique largely focuses on the relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘violence’: political violence can never be justified because violence destroys the capacity for collective flourishing on which politics depends; it ‘unmakes the world’, to paraphrase Elaine Scarry. As such, political violence is something that falls apart under the weight of its own contradictions.

What, then, of justification? Frazer and Hutchings argue that justifications of political violence often form ‘part of [its] enabling conditions’, masking or legitimising its destructive tendencies in the name of values such as ‘order’, ‘justice’ and ‘self-preservation’. Yet despite this,

their argument remains animated by justificatory modes of critical judgement. Does their focus on violence ‘as it is practiced and experienced’ necessarily loosen justification from the discourses of permission and enablement that so often define it? The martial reveries of someone like Filippo Marinetti suggest otherwise: there can be joy in cruelty, in harm, even in slaughter. Instead, might their argument point towards a rejection of justification as a framework for thinking about political violence altogether?

One text that Frazer and Hutchings do not cite that kept coming to mind as I read *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* is Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’. Among Benjamin’s arguments is that the legal, political and ethical frameworks through which actions are constituted as ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ are themselves founded upon and formed through violence, and cannot be conceived separately from it. In their new book *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler frames Benjamin’s problem as follows: ‘if we only think about violence within the framework of its possible justification or lack of justification, does that framework not determine the phenomenon of violence in advance?’

Butler shows how justifications of violence often produce a sort of semantic confusion. Violence is often justified on the grounds that it is *not* violent: that it is in fact responding to violence, or to the threat of violence as exemplified by particular assemblies or bodies that prefigure (or are said to prefigure) threat, harm or disorder. Justification is here an instrument of violence; a way of constructing the (racialised, gendered) threats that underpin its legitimacy. ‘If a demonstration in support of freedom of expression’, Butler writes, ‘a demonstration that exercises that very freedom, is called “violent”, that can only be because the power that misuses language that way seeks to secure its own monopoly on violence through maligning the opposition.’

One consequence of this dissimulation of violence as ‘security’, ‘law-enforcement’ or simply what it takes to maintain ‘order’ is that non-violence itself gets dragged into the semantic swirl. How can non-violence serve as a framework for action in a context where the indiscriminate firing of rubber bullets and tear gas constitutes ‘keeping the peace’? To think about violence primarily in terms of its justification (or lack thereof) does not appear to provide an obvious way out of this mire. Instead, Butler

starts with ontology: 'there is a sense in which violence done to another is at once a violence done to the self', and that 'nonviolence ... [is] a way of acknowledging that social relation, however fraught it may be'. In this sense, non-violence is prefigurative and performative: it is practiced in order to 'lay open the possibilities that belong to a newer political imaginary'. It also implicitly refuses to be restrained within a framework that sees commitment as a matter of conscience – how can it be, given the opposition between the individualism of this position and the relationality that underpins non-violence as Butler sees it?

For Butler, a commitment to non-violence that derives from an acknowledgment of our ontological interdependence simultaneously demands a recognition of our equality. Because we are all formed in relations of dependence that continue to sustain and nourish us throughout our lives, none of us can claim precedence over any other. As in much of their work over the past fifteen years, Butler conceives of this equality in terms of grievability: lives are valued insofar as they are grievable, and violence emerges when lives are valued differentially or stripped of their value altogether, when the hypothetical or actual loss of this or that life is no longer rendered *as a loss*. Conversely, to practice an ethic of non-violence is to affirm the equal grievability of all lives, with that equality rooted not in the atomised terms of liberal humanism but rather in interdependence.

Crucially, this vision of equality is not a vision of harmony. To conceive of our selves as constructed by and sustained through interaction with others does not presume relations of peace or concord. Non-violence, as Butler's title suggests, is a *forceful* commitment. And indeed, the lack of self-sufficiency that defines the dependent subject is for Butler a source of deep anxiety, yearning, fear and even rage. The potential for conflict that arises from our sociality cannot be finally overcome: to repress or prohibit violent impulses is simply to internalise them. Instead, Butler relocates the psychic impulses that undergird violence, and that stem from the relational subject's inexorable incompleteness, within a 'counter-institutional ethos and practice' that seeks to preserve and maintain our relational obligations to one another.

In order to perform this act of recontextualisation, Butler turns to psychoanalysis. This framework allows

her to foreground the ways violence not only produces fractured and divided subjective and intersubjective spaces, but also emerges from them. Like Jacqueline Rose, in her recent *On Violence and On Violence Against Women* (2021), Butler uses Freud in tandem with his feminist interlocutors and critics in order to show how violence often functions as a desperate flail against our incapacity to shore up our selves. The demand non-violence makes upon the subject is to live and act *with* this incompleteness, without projecting aggression outwards onto 'phantasms' constructed in order to provide an externalised threat to one's imagined wholeness. For this reason, an ethic and/or politics of non-violence has to begin with a critique of violence: it must 'confront all these phantasmagoric and political challenges', and by refusing their lure carve open a new intersubjective space in which they no longer hold sway. It manifests an 'insurrectionary solidarity' that is forceful by virtue of its persistence in the face of forces that would otherwise overwhelm it.

Butler's argument both builds on and contributes to a wider feminist literature concerned with developing ways of social and political living that stem from a relational understanding of the self. At the heart of this literature sits the work of Adriana Cavarero, with whom Butler acknowledges an affinity in their contribution to *Towards a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence*, a symposium on Cavarero's work that also features reflections by Bonnie Honig (among others), as well as an essay by Cavarero herself. For Cavarero, western philosophy is founded upon a fictionally 'upright' thinking subject, with its guiding metaphor to be found in Plato's cave, whose prisoners' procession to enlightenment commences with them standing up. In contrast, Cavarero posits an ethics of 'inclination' in which the self is always leaning outwards, away from its internal centre of gravity. Unexpectedly, Cavarero's model for this posture is a vision of motherhood, namely Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with St Anne*. It is here that both Butler and Honig intervene, with the former conceiving of inclination in queer terms as something that haunts rectitude as its constitutive other side, and the latter building on the radical re-reading of Sophocles that she developed in *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013) by suggesting sorority rather than maternity as an alternative model for feminist relationality.

While accepting Butler and Cavarero's relational ontology, however, questions still remain about the ethical and political demands that are made when violence is unleashed not only on ontologically related selves but also on bodies in their spatio-temporal ipseity. In a manner reminiscent of Michel Serres' writings on skin in *The Five Senses*, Butler takes the body to be 'the threshold of the person, the site of passage and porosity, the evidence of an openness to alterity that is definitional of the body itself'. Yet even if the individualised body provides an insufficient account of personhood, it is still a necessary condition of any person's life. At moments when it is physically threatened, there is rarely space for the articulation of critique: by the time the knee is pressing down upon the trachea in the name of this or that phantasmatic threat, relationality has already fractured beyond repair. While Butler is surely right to argue, with Cavarero, that 'there is no sustaining of singularity outside the context of constitutive sociality and ecology', the act of extinguishing a body's claim to life is one with

singular as well as social consequences. What form can non-violence's 'open-ended struggle with violence and its countervailing forces' take in these moments of immediate existential danger?

It is clear that responding to this question cannot entail relapsing into the atomistic individualism that underpins justificatory discourses of 'self-defence'. The presumption that the subject stands autonomously is, as Butler and Cavarero both note, a masculinist fiction. Yet they as well as Frazer and Hutchings are clear that non-violence does not entail submission – quite the opposite, in fact. Are we left where we began, at Lorde's crossroads, facing down 'an articulated power that is not on our terms'? Perhaps. But non-violence is not a panacea; it cannot transcend the crises violence brings about, whether ethical, political, or existential. Instead, it begins to build a world where such crises might never come to pass; a world it is necessary to work towards, because – as Jericho Brown tells us in his 2014 collection *The New Testament* – 'nothing we erect is our own'.

**Alister Wedderburn**

## Abstract egalitarianism

Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). 432pp., £28.00 hb., 978 0 69116 308 6

In 1952, a young American philosopher named John Rawls arrived in Oxford on a Fulbright scholarship. Fresh from military service in the Pacific that had diverted his earlier ambitions of becoming an Episcopalian priest, he was redirecting his prodigious energies towards questions philosophical and political, spending his time discussing logic and language with analytic philosophers and talking politics with the anxiously anti-Stalinist revisionist wing of the British Labour Party. The ideas he first discussed in post-war Oxford remained on his mind, surfacing occasionally in eagerly circulated, unpublished papers until in 1971, the same year that the collapse of the Bretton-Woods system heralded the advent of a new economic order, the book he had been writing was finally published. It was called *A Theory of Justice*, and, in the following years and decades, the doctrine of 'liberal egalitarianism', expounded in five hundred pages of densely

argued prose, would come to set the terms of debate in Anglophone political philosophy. It determined the kind of questions that could be asked and the forms that acceptable answers might take. Political philosophy, by and large, would take place under the long shadow cast by Rawls' book. Katerina Forrester's *In The Shadow of Justice* is the most comprehensive and impressive attempt to historicise liberal egalitarianism, defamiliarising its near-hegemonic conclusions and denaturalising its assumptions, and thereby asking what might emerge from out of its shadow.

Forrester's book is an intellectual history of liberal egalitarianism, but it does not dwell on the various streams of influence that went into Rawl's book, instead examining in detail its legacy, and the ways that the evolution of the doctrine overlapped with the political and philosophical developments of the late twentieth century.