

***The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, by Judith Butler, London, Verso, 2020, x + 224 pp., €18,00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781788732765.**

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Is it necessary to resort to violence in order to influence social, political, and economic change, or can change occur through the employment of non-violent tactics of resistance? Such questions are addressed by Judith Butler in her book *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* that is in conversation with her previous book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* which connects the ideologies of non-violence and the political struggle for social equality.

The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind deals with the ethics of non-violence, placing them on the broader spectrum of political quest for equality. Butler addresses the “need to radically re-examine violence, connecting it to an ontology that demonstrates a vulnerability ingrained in humanity” (Cavarero 163). The relationship among violence and vulnerability is at the centre of Butler’s political thought. Therefore, non-violence is a highly political as well as an ethical matter. An interesting point that Butler makes is that the practice of non-violence is often misperceived as a practice that encompasses passivity to contest a particular form of power; however, this is not the case. There seems to be a discrepancy between which practices are considered as violent and which as non-violent; their categorization is not clear-cut. Butler analyses violence and non-violence from different points of view by pointing out diverse forms of non-violent tactics of resistance such as demonstrations, marches, vigils, and boycotts. Ideally, she argues that the employment of non-violence is necessary in our society although the question remains: how could this be achieved? Ultimately the choice of employing non-violence instead of violence is a ‘global obligation’ for everyone. Butler supports that non-

violence should be viewed as “a social and political practice” (21), a never-ending “ongoing struggle” (23). She heavily draws on psychoanalysis, specifically on the work of Melanie Klein, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and Frantz Fanon to problematise the discourse of non-violence by making an addition to the discursive field of contemporary critical theory. Butler differentiates herself from these earlier scholars by extending their discourse of non-violence as an active choice in the way one resists and invokes change.

Butler argues that the choice of not being is an ethical one. It depends on different assumptions and assertions. For example, it is argued that people are interconnected so the exertion of violence against another person could also wind up affecting one’s own self or other persons close to her/him, such as her/his parents, her/his siblings, her/his friends or even her/his partner. In contrast, to the neo-liberalism stature that every person is self-sufficient, we exist in a web of interconnectedness. So, can we justify violence as a form of self-defence? If someone attacks us and we shoot him, can we claim that it was a matter of preservation or will we end up in jail? The justification of the employment of violence in case of self-defence still remains at question. Butler states that everyone is ‘grievable’ to another person so people do share the moral obligation of not harming the other. The notion of grievability is not new but existed in previous works of Butler in which she examined the limits of sexual autonomy. Therefore, grievability is interconnected to some kind of loss.

To the existing discourse, there could also be legal justifications and incentives to non-violence in Butler’s view. Certainly, different forms of violence may be prohibited by law because they go against what is considered acceptable. Therefore, there is the legal enticement to avoid at all costs being an aggressor. In Butler’s understanding, there is the impetus to safeguard one’s reputation intact and his record clear because when courts are faced with the task of assessing the credibility of a person, they may take into account the person’s violent and/or non-violent prior experiences and dispositions. In case of a violation, the court needs to assess her/his character and may take into consideration if s/he has exhibited violent behaviour prior to the incident. Butler foregrounds non-violence through a legal framework, emphasising the need to contextualise resistance towards violence as both subjective and collective. Butler’s understanding of violence enmeshed with ethics is noteworthy in legal discourse. Non-violence is central in mobilising social justice not only on the basis of ethical appeals but also on political terms.

Another point is that Butler’s suggestion on the practice of non-violence needs to be contextualised in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement. Violence denies the very humanity of precarious lives, the lives of the disenfranchised, as these bodies are more prone to victimization than their privileged counterparts. For example, actions like running which are readily acceptable turn out to be problematic once associated with a black body at a specific space and are turned into violent encounters. Structural violence is perpetuated by the inequality deeply ingrained in social structures which were set to be eliminated in the first place. The Black Lives Matter movement gives value to every life

contesting violence as a viable practice. In the United States, self-defence constitutes the excuse to justify the murder of unarmed African Americans within a system where the black body embodies violence. Butler builds on this scheme of self-defence and unveils it as a justification of prejudice. The individual asserts its value by the non-violent act of speaking, a highly performative act asserting its value while denouncing its victimization. Individualism is perceived as a limit for a non-violent environment as resistance to violence is relational and interdependent. Butler incites readers to abandon the prevalent individualistic conception of the self, as the notion of the commitment to non-violence as an individual act, condones silence regarding objective violence without any individual being held accountable.

Butler's analysis of non-violence further extends her work in theorising embodiment which continues to shape the ever-evolving discourse of gender performativity and phenomenology. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of diverse forms of violence still remains opaque. The emergence of a new affective era, continuously reshaped, is a reality. We live in a moment in which a new economy of emotions is emerging due to the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Butler's work is directly placed in this dialectic, as it challenges the solidarity of the experience of non-violence. Butler suggests that for a non-violent world an altered state of perception, one that would disorient us from the *donnée* of the political present, is necessary. In such a world all lives are sustainable and the right to persist is a social right.

Works Cited

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