

**THE
FORCE
OF**

**JUDITH
BUTLER**



**NON-
VIOLENCE**

THE FORCE OF NONVIOLENCE

An Ethico-Political Bind

Judith Butler



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“Situating non-violence at the cross-roads of the ethical and political, The Force of Non-Violence brings into focus the ethical binds that emerge within the force field of violence. Non-violence is very often misunderstood as a passive practice that emanates from a calm region of the soul, or as an individualist ethic with an unrealistic relation to existing forms of power. This book argues for an aggressive form of non-violence that struggles with psychic ambivalence and seeks to embody social ideals of interdependency and equality. Only through a critique of individualism can the ethical and political ideal of non-violence be understood in relation to the ideal of equality and the demand for grievability. In this psychosocial and philosophical reflection that draws upon Foucault, Fanon, Freud, and Benjamin, Butler argues that to oppose violence now requires understanding its different modalities, including the regulation of the grievability of lives. The book shows how “racial and demographic phantasms” enter into the rationale for inflicting state violence and other modes of “letting die” by investing violence in those who are most severely exposed to its effects and subjugated to its lethal power. The struggle for non-violence is found in modes of resistance and movements for social transformation that separate off aggression from its destructive aims to affirm the living potentials of radical egalitarian politics”-- Provided by publisher.

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Introduction

The case for nonviolence encounters skeptical responses from across the political spectrum. There are those on the left who claim that violence alone has the power to effect radical social and economic transformation, and others who claim, more modestly, that violence should remain one of the tactics at our disposal to bring about such change. One can put forth arguments in favor of nonviolence or, alternately, the instrumental or strategic use of violence, but those arguments can only be conducted in public if there is general agreement on what constitutes violence and nonviolence. One major challenge faced by those in favor of nonviolence is that “violence” and “nonviolence” are disputed terms. For instance, some people call wounding acts of speech “violence,” whereas others claim that language, except in the case of explicit threats, cannot properly be called “violent.” Yet others hold to restrictive views of violence, understanding the “blow” as its defining physical moment; others insist that economic and legal structures are “violent,” that they act upon bodies, even if they do not always take the form of physical violence. Indeed, the figure of the blow has tacitly organized some of the major debates on violence, suggesting that violence is something that happens between two parties in a heated encounter. Without disputing the violence of the physical blow, we can nevertheless insist that social structures or systems, including systemic racism, are violent. Indeed, sometimes the physical strike to the head or the body is an expression of systemic violence, at which point one has to be able to understand the relationship of act to structure, or system. To understand structural or systemic violence, one needs to move beyond positive accounts that limit our

understanding of how violence works. And one needs to find frameworks more encompassing than those that rely on two figures, one striking and the other struck. Of course, any account of violence that cannot explain the strike, the blow, the act of sexual violence (including rape), or that fails to understand the way violence can work in the intimate dyad or the face-to-face encounter, fails descriptively, and analytically, to clarify what violence is—that is, what we are talking about when we debate over violence and nonviolence.¹

It seems like it should be easy to simply oppose violence and allow such a statement to summarize one's position on the matter. But in public debates, we see that "violence" is labile, its semantics appropriated in ways that call to be contested. States and institutions sometimes call "violent" any number of expressions of political dissent, or of opposition to the state or the authority of the institution in question. Demonstrations, encampments, assemblies, boy-cotts, and strikes are all subject to being called "violent" even when they do not seek recourse to physical fighting, or to the forms of systemic or structural violence mentioned above.² When states or institutions do this, they seek to rename nonviolent practices as violent, conducting a political war, as it were, at the level of public semantics. If a demonstration in support of freedom of expression, 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, justifying the use of police, army, or security forces against those who seek to exercise and defend freedom in that way. American studies scholar Chandan Reddy has argued that the form taken by liberal modernity in the United States posits the state as a guarantee of a freedom from violence that fundamentally depends on unleashing violence against racial minorities, and against all peoples characterized as irrational and outside the national norm.³ The state, in his view, is founded in racial violence and continues to inflict it against minorities in systematic ways. Thus, racial violence is understood to serve the state's self-defense. How often in the United States and elsewhere are black and brown people on the street or in their homes called or deemed "violent" by police who arrest them or gun them down, even when they are unarmed, even when they are walking or running away, when they are trying to make a complaint themselves, or simply fast asleep?⁴ It is both curious and appalling to see how the defense of violence works under such conditions, for the target has to be figured as a threat, a vessel of real or actual violence, in order for lethal police action to appear as self-defense. If the person was not doing anything demonstrably violent, then perhaps the person is simply figured as violent, as a violent *kind* of person, or as

pure violence embodied in and by that person. The latter claim manifests racism more often than not.

What starts, then, as an apparently moral argument about whether to be for or against violence quickly turns into a debate about how violence is defined and who is called “violent”—and for what purposes. When a group assembles to oppose censorship or the lack of democratic freedoms, and the group is called a “mob,” or is understood as a chaotic or destructive threat to the social order, then the group is both named and figured as potentially or actually violent, at which point the state can issue a justification to defend society against this violent threat. When what follows is imprisonment, injury, or killing, the violence in the scene emerges as state violence. We can name state violence as “violent” even though it has used its own power to name and to represent the dissenting power of some group of people as “violent.” Similarly, a peaceful demonstration such as that which took place in Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013,⁵ or a letter calling for peace such as the one signed by many Turkish scholars in 2016,⁶ can be effectively figured and represented as a “violent” act only if the state either has its own media or exercises sufficient control over the media. Under such conditions, exercising rights of assembly is called a manifestation of “terrorism,” which, in turn, calls down the state censor, clubbing and spraying by the police, termination of employment, indefinite detention, imprisonment, and exile.

As much as it would make matters easier to be able to identify violence in a way that is clear and commands consensus, this proves impossible to do in a political situation where the power to attribute violence to the opposition itself becomes an instrument by which to enhance state power, to discredit the aims of the opposition, or even to justify their radical disenfranchisement, imprisonment, and murder. At such moments, the attribution has to be countered on the grounds that it is untrue and unfair. But how is that to be done in a public sphere where semantic confusion has been sown about what is and is not violent? Are we left with a confusing array of opinions about violence and nonviolence and forced to admit to a generalized relativism? Or can we establish a way of distinguishing between a tactical attribution of violence that falsifies and inverts its direction, and those forms of violence, often structural and systemic, that too often elude direct naming and apprehension?

If one wants to make an argument in favor of nonviolence, it will be necessary to understand and evaluate the ways that violence is figured and attributed within a field of discursive, social, and state power; the inversions that are tactically performed; and the phantasmatic character of the attribution itself. Further, we will have to undertake a critique of the schemes by which state

violence justifies itself, and the relation of those justificatory schemes to the effort to maintain its monopoly on violence. That monopoly depends upon a naming practice, one that often dissimulates violence as legal coercion or externalizes its own violence onto its target, rediscovering it as the violence of the other.

To argue for or against nonviolence requires that we establish the difference between violence and nonviolence, if we can. But there is no quick way to arrive at a stable semantic distinction between the two when that distinction is so often exploited for the purposes of concealing and extending violent aims and practices. In other words, we cannot race to the phenomenon itself without passing through the conceptual schemes that dispose the use of the term in various directions, and without an analysis of how those dispositions work. If those accused of doing violence while engaging in no violent acts seek to dispute the status of the accusation as unjustifiable, they will have to demonstrate how the allegation of violence is used—not just “what it says,” but “what it is doing with what is said.” Within what episteme does it gather credibility? In other words, why is it sometimes believed, and most crucially, what can be done to expose and defeat the effective character of the speech act—its plausibility effect?

To start down such a path, we have to accept that “violence” and “nonviolence” are used variably and perversely, without pitching into a form of nihilism suffused by the belief that violence and nonviolence are whatever those in power decide they should be. Part of the task of this book is to accept the difficulty of finding and securing the definition of violence when it is subject to instrumental definitions that serve political interests and sometimes state violence itself. In my view, that difficulty does not imply a chaotic relativism that would undermine the task of critical thought in order to expose an instrumental use of that distinction that is both false and harmful. Both violence and nonviolence arrive in the fields of moral debate and political analysis already interpreted, worked over by prior usages. There is no way to avoid the demand to interpret both violence and nonviolence, and to assess the distinction between them, if we hope to oppose state violence and to reflect carefully on the justifiability of violent tactics on the left. As we wade into moral philosophy here, we find ourselves in the crosscurrents where moral and political philosophy meet, with consequences for both how we end up doing politics, and what world we seek to help bring into being.

One of the most popular arguments on the left to defend the tactical use of violence begins with the claim that many people already live in the force field of

violence. Because violence is already happening, the argument continues, there is no real choice about whether or not to enter into violence through one's action: we are already inside the field of violence. According to that view, the distance that moral deliberation takes on the question of whether or not to act in a violent way is a privilege and luxury, betraying something about the power of its own location. In that view, the consideration of violent action is not a choice, since one is already—and unwillingly—within the force field of violence. Because violence is happening all the time (and it is happening regularly to minorities), such resistance is but a form of counter-violence.⁷ Apart from a general and traditional left claim about the necessity of a “violent struggle” for revolutionary purposes, there are more specific justificatory strategies at work: violence is happening against us, so we are justified in taking violent action against those who (a) started the violence and (b) directed it against us. We do this in the name of our own lives and our right to persist in the world.

As for the claim that resistance to violence is counter-violence, we might still pose a set of questions: Even if violence is circulating all the time and we find ourselves in a force field of violence, do we want to have a say about whether violence continues to circulate? If it circulates all the time, is it therefore inevitable that it circulates? What would it mean to dispute the inevitability of its circulation? The argument may be, “Others do it, and so should we”; or else, “Others do it against us, so we should do it against them, in the name of self-preservation.” These are each different, but important claims. The first holds to a principle of straightforward reciprocity, suggesting that whatever actions the other takes, I am licensed to take as well. That line of argumentation, however, sidesteps the question of whether what the other does is justifiable. The second claim links violence with self-defense and self-preservation, an argument we will take up in the subsequent chapters. For the moment, though, let us ask: Who is this “self” defended in the name of self-defense?⁸ How is that self delineated from other selves, from history, land, or other defining relations? Is the one to whom violence is done not also in some sense part of the “self” who defends itself through an act of violence? There is a sense in which violence done to another is at once a violence done to the self, but only if the relation between them defines them both quite fundamentally.

This last proposition indicates a central concern of this book. For if the one who practices nonviolence is related to the one against whom violence is contemplated, then there appears to be a prior social relation between them; they are part of one another, or one self is implicated in another self. Nonviolence would, then, be a way of acknowledging that social relation, however fraught it

may be, and of affirming the normative aspirations that follow from that prior social relatedness. As a result, an ethics of nonviolence cannot be predicated on individualism, and it must take the lead in waging a critique of individualism as the basis of ethics and politics alike. An ethics and politics of nonviolence would have to account for this way that selves are implicated in each other's lives, bound by a set of relations that can be as destructive as they can be sustaining. The relations that bind and define extend beyond the dyadic human encounter, which is why nonviolence pertains not only to human relations, but to all living and inter-constitutive relations.

To launch this inquiry into social relations, however, we would have to know what kind of potential or actual social bond holds between both subjects in a violent encounter. If the self is constituted through its relations with others, then part of what it means to preserve or negate a self is to preserve or negate the extended social ties that define the self and its world. Over and against the idea that the self will be bound to act violently in the name of its individual self-preservation, this inquiry supposes that nonviolence requires a critique of egological ethics as well as of the political legacy of individualism in order to open up the idea of selfhood as a fraught field of social relationality. That relationality is, of course, defined in part by negativity, that is, by conflict, anger, and aggression. The destructive potential of human relations does not deny all relationality, and relational perspectives cannot evade the persistence of this potential or actual destruction of social ties. As a result, relationality is not by itself a good thing, a sign of connectedness, an ethical norm to be posited over and against destruction: rather, relationality is a vexed and ambivalent field in which the question of ethical obligation has to be worked out in light of a persistent and constitutive destructive potential. Whatever "doing the right thing" turns out to be, it depends on passing through the division or struggle that conditions that ethical decision to begin with. That task is never exclusively reflexive, that is, dependent on my relation to myself alone. Indeed, when the world presents as a force field of violence, the task of nonviolence is to find ways of living and acting in that world such that violence is checked or ameliorated, or its direction turned, precisely at moments when it seems to saturate that world and offer no way out. The body can be the vector of that turn, but so too can discourse, collective practices, infrastructures, and institutions. In response to the objection that a position in favor of nonviolence is simply unrealistic, this argument maintains that nonviolence requires a critique of what counts as reality, and it affirms the power and necessity of counter-realism in times like these. Perhaps nonviolence requires a certain leave-taking from reality as it is currently constituted, laying open the possibilities that belong to a newer

political imaginary.

Many on the left argue that they believe in nonviolence but make an exception for self-defense. To understand their claim, we would need to know who the “self” is—its territorial limits and boundaries, its constitutive ties. If the self that I defend is me, my relatives, others who belong to my community, nation, or religion, or those who share a language with me, then I am a closet communitarian who will, it seems, preserve the lives of those who are like me, but certainly not those who are unlike me. Moreover, I apparently live in a world in which that “self” is recognizable as a self. Once we see that certain selves are considered worth defending while others are not, is there not a problem of inequality that follows from the justification of violence in the service of self-defense? One cannot explain this form of inequality, which accords measures of grievability to groups across the global spectrum, without taking account of the racial schemes that make such grotesque distinctions between which lives are valuable (and potentially grievable, if lost) and those which are not.

Given that self-defense is very often regarded as the justifiable exception to the norms guiding a nonviolent practice, we have to consider both (a) who counts as such a self and (b) how encompassing is the “self” of self-defense (again, does it include one’s family, community, religion, nation, traditional land, customary practices?). For lives not considered grievable (those treated as if they can be neither lost nor mourned), dwelling already in what Frantz Fanon called “the zone of non-being,” the assertion of a life that matters, as we see in the Black Lives Matter movement, can break through the schema. Lives matter in the sense that they assume physical form within the sphere of appearance; lives matter because they are to be valued equally. And yet, the claim of self-defense on the part of those who wield power is too often a defense of power, of its prerogatives, and of the inequalities it presupposes and produces. The “self” who is defended in such cases is one who identifies with others who belong to whiteness, to a specific nation, to a party in a border dispute; and so the terms of self-defense augment the purposes of war. Such a “self” can function as a kind of regime, including as part of its extended self all those who bear similitude to one’s color, class, and privilege, thus expelling from the regime of the subject/self all those marked by difference within that economy. Although we think of self-defense as a response to a blow initiated from the outside, the privileged self requires no such instigation to draw its boundaries and police its exclusions. “Any possible threat”—that is, any imagined threat, any phantasm of threat—is enough to unleash its self-entitled violence. As the philosopher Elsa Dorlin has pointed out, only some selves are regarded as entitled to self-

defense.⁹ Whose claims of self-defense, for instance, are more readily believed in a court of law, and whose are more likely to be discounted and dismissed? Who, in other words, bears a self that is regarded as defensible, an existence that can appear within the legal frames of power as a life worthy, worth defending, not worth losing?

One of the strongest arguments for the use of violence on the left is that it is tactically necessary in order to defeat structural or systemic violence, or to dismantle a violent regime, such as apartheid, dictatorship, or totalitarianism.¹⁰ That may well be right, and I don't dispute it. But for that argument to work, we would need to know what distinguishes the violence of the regime from the violence that seeks to take it down. Is it always possible to make that distinction? Is it sometimes necessary to suffer the fact that the distinction between the one violence and the other can collapse? In other words, does violence care about that distinction, or for that matter, any of our typologies? Does the use of violence reduplicate violence, and in directions that cannot always be restrained in advance?

Sometimes the argument in favor of violence is that it is only a means to achieve another goal. So one question is: Can violence remain a mere instrument or means for taking down violence—its structures, its regime—without becoming an end in itself? The instrumentalist defense of violence depends quite crucially on being able to show that violence can be restricted to the status of a tool, a means, without becoming an end itself. The use of the tool to realize such purposes presupposes that the tool is guided by a clear intention and remains so guided throughout the course of the action. It also depends on knowing when the course of a violent action will come to an end. What happens if violence gets out of hand, if it is used for purposes for which it was never intended, exceeding and defying its governing intention? What if violence is precisely the kind of phenomenon that is constantly “getting out of hand”? Lastly, what if the use of violence as a means to achieve a goal licenses, implicitly or effectively, the use of violence more broadly, thereby bringing more violence into the world? Does that not lead to the possibility of a situation in which others with contrary intentions rely upon that revitalized license in order to realize their own intentions, to pursue destructive aims that are contrary to the ends constrained by its instrumental use—aims that may not be governed by any clear intention at all, or may prove to be destructive, unfocused, and unintentional?¹¹

We can see that at the outset of any discussion about violence and nonviolence, we are caught up in another set of issues. First, the fact that “violence” is used strategically to describe situations that are interpreted very

differently suggests that *violence is always interpreted*. That thesis does not mean that violence is nothing but an interpretation, where interpretation is conceived as a subjective and arbitrary mode of designation. Rather, violence is interpreted in the sense that it appears within frameworks that are sometimes incommensurable or conflicting, and so it appears differently—or altogether fails to appear—depending on how it is worked over by the framework(s) at issue. Stabilizing a definition of violence depends less on an enumeration of its instances than on a conceptualization that can take account of its oscillations within conflicting political frameworks. Indeed, the construction of a new framework tasked with such a purpose is one of the aims of this project.

Second, nonviolence is very often understood to be a moral position, a matter of individual conscience or of the reasons given for an individual choice not to engage in a violent way. It may be, however, that the most persuasive reasons for the practice of nonviolence directly imply a critique of individualism and require that we rethink the social bonds that constitute us as living creatures. It is not simply that an individual abrogates his or her conscience or deeply held principles in acting violently, but that certain “ties” required for social life, that is, the life of a social creature, are imperiled by violence. Similarly, the argument that justifies violence on the basis of self-defense appears to know in advance what that “self” is, who has the right to have one, and where its boundaries lie. If the “self” is conceived as relational, however, then the defenders of self-defense must give a good account of what bounds that self. If one self is vitally connected to a set of others and cannot be conceived without them, then when and where does that singular self start and end? The argument against violence, then, not only implies a critique of individualism, but an elaboration of those social bonds or relations that require nonviolence. Nonviolence as a matter of individual morality thus gives way to a social philosophy of living and sustainable bonds.

Moreover, the account of requisite social bonds has to be thought in relation to the socially unequal ways that “selves” worth defending are articulated within a political field.¹² The description of social bonds without which life is imperiled takes place at the level of a social ontology, to be understood more as a social imaginary than as a metaphysics of the social. In other words, we can assert in a general way that social interdependency characterizes life, and then proceed to account for violence as an attack on that interdependency, an attack on persons, yes; but perhaps most fundamentally, it is an attack on “bonds.” And yet, interdependency, though accounting for differentials of independence and dependence, implies social equality: each is dependent, or formed and sustained

in relations of depending upon, and being depended upon. What each depends upon, and what depends upon each one, is varied, since it is not just other human lives, but other sensate creatures, environments, and infrastructures: we depend upon them, and they depend on us, in turn, to sustain a livable world. To refer to equality in such a context is not to speak of an equality among all persons, if by “person” we mean a singular and distinct individual, gaining its definition by its boundary. Singularity and distinctness exist, as do boundaries, but they constitute differentiating characteristics of beings who are defined and sustained by virtue of their interrelationality. Without that overarching sense of the interrelational, we take the bodily boundary to be the end rather than 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. The threshold of the body, the body as threshold, undermines the idea of the body as a unit. Thus equality cannot be reduced to a calculus that accords each abstract person the same value, since the equality of persons has now to be thought precisely in terms of social interdependency. So, though it is true that each person should be treated equally, equal treatment is not possible outside of a social organization of life in which material resources, food distribution, housing, work, and infrastructure seek to achieve equal conditions of livability. Reference to such equal conditions of livability is therefore essential to the determination of “equality” in any substantive sense of the term.

Further, when we ask whose lives count as “selves” worth defending, that is, eligible for self-defense, the question only makes sense if we recognize pervasive forms of inequality that establish some lives as disproportionately more livable and grievable than others. They establish this inequality within a particular framework, but this inequality is historical and contested by competing frameworks. It says nothing about the intrinsic value of any life. Further, as we think about the prevailing and differential ways that populations are valued and disvalued, protected and abandoned, we come up against forms of power that establish the unequal worth of lives by establishing their unequal grievability. And here, I do not mean to treat “populations” as a sociological given, since they are to some degree produced by their common exposure to injury and destruction, the differential ways they are regarded as grievable (and worth sustaining) and ungrievable (already lost and, hence, easy to destroy or to expose to forces of destruction).

The discussion of social bonds and the demographics of unequal grievability may seem unrelated to the opening discussion of the arguments used to justify violence or to defend nonviolence. The point, however, is that all these

arguments presuppose ideas about what counts as violence, since violence is always interpreted in such discussion. They presuppose as well views on individualism and on social relationality, interdependency, demographics, and equality. If we ask what violence destroys, or what grounds we have for naming and opposing violence in the name of nonviolence, then we have to situate violent practices (as well as institutions, structures, and systems) in light of the conditions of life that they destroy. Without an understanding of the conditions of life and livability, and their relative difference, we can know neither what violence destroys nor why we should care.

Third, as Walter Benjamin made clear in his 1920 essay “Critique of Violence,” an instrumentalist logic has governed the prevailing ways in which violence has been justified.¹³ One of the first questions he poses in that complex essay is: Why has the instrumentalist framework been accepted as the necessary one for thinking about violence? Instead of asking what ends violence can achieve, why not turn the question back on itself and ask: What justifies the instrumentalist framework for debating the justifiability of violence, a framework, in other words, that relies on the means/ends distinction? In fact, Benjamin’s point proves to be slightly different: 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? Not only does Benjamin’s analysis alert us to the ways that the instrumentalist framework determines the phenomenon, but it leads to the following question: *Can violence and nonviolence both be thought beyond the instrumentalist framework, and what new possibilities for ethical and political critical thought result from that opening?*

Benjamin’s text arouses anxiety among many readers precisely because they do not want to suspend the question of what does, and does not, justify violence. The fear, it seems, is that if we set the question of justification aside, then all violence will be justified. That conclusion, however, by returning the problem to the scheme of justification, fails to understand what potential is opened up by calling into question the instrumentalist logic. Although Benjamin does not provide the kinds of answers required for a reflection such as this, his questioning of the means/ends framework allows us to consider the debate outside of the terms of *technē*. For those who claim that violence is only a provisional tactic or tool, one challenge to their position takes this form: if tools can use their users, and violence is a tool, then does it not follow that violence can make use of its user? Violence as a tool is already operating in the world before anyone takes it up: that fact alone neither justifies nor discounts the use of

the tool. What seems most important, however, is that the tool is already part of a practice, presupposing a world conducive to its use; that the use of the tool builds or rebuilds a specific kind of world, activating a sedimented legacy of use.¹⁴ When any of us commit acts of violence, we are, in and through those acts, building a more violent world. What might at first seem to be merely an instrument, a *technē*, to be discarded when its goal is accomplished turns out to be a *praxis*: a means that posits an end at the moment it is actualized, that is, where the means presupposes and enacts the end in the course of its actualization. This is a process that cannot be grasped within the instrumentalist framework. Quite apart from assiduous efforts to restrict the use of violence as means rather than an end, the actualization of violence as a means can inadvertently become its own end, producing new violence, producing violence anew, reiterating the license, and licensing further violence. Violence does not exhaust itself in the realization of a just end; rather, it renews itself in directions that exceed both deliberate intention and instrumental schemes. In other words, by acting as if the use of violence can be a means to achieve a nonviolent end, one imagines that the practice of violence does not in the act posit violence as its own end. The *technē* is undermined by the *praxis*, and the use of violence only makes the world into a more violent place, by bringing more violence into the world. Jacques Derrida's reading of Benjamin focuses on the way that justice exceeds the law.¹⁵ But might divine violence open up the possibility of techniques of governance that exceed the law, therefore arousing interpretive debate about what qualifies as a justification, and how the framework for justification partially determines what we call "violence"? We will consider this question in [Chapter 3](#), "The Ethics and Politics of Nonviolence."

In the course of this work, I hope to challenge some major presuppositions of nonviolence. First, nonviolence has now to be understood less as a moral position adopted by individuals in relation to a field of possible action than as a social and political practice undertaken in concert, culminating in a form of resistance to systemic forms of destruction coupled with a commitment to world building that honors global interdependency of the kind that embodies ideals of economic, social, and political freedom and equality. Second, nonviolence does not necessarily emerge from a pacific or calm part of the soul. Very often it is an expression of rage, indignation, and aggression.¹⁶ Although some people confuse aggression with violence, it is central to the argument of this book to foreground the fact that nonviolent forms of resistance can and must be aggressively pursued. A practice of aggressive nonviolence is, therefore, not a contradiction in terms. Mahatma Gandhi insisted that *satyagraha*, or "soul

force,” his name for a practice and politics of nonviolence, is a nonviolent force, one that consists at once of an “insistence on truth ... that arms the votary with matchless power.” To understand this force or strength, there can be no simple reduction to physical strength. At the same time, “soul force” takes an embodied form. The practice of “going limp” before political power is, on the one hand, a passive posture, and is thought to belong to the tradition of passive resistance; at the same time, it is a deliberate way of exposing the body to police power, of entering the field of violence, and of exercising an adamant and embodied form of political agency. It requires suffering, yes, but for the purposes of transforming both oneself and social reality. Third, nonviolence is an ideal that cannot always be fully honored in the practice. To the degree that those who practice nonviolent resistance put their body in the way of an external power, they make physical contact, presenting a force against force in the process. Nonviolence does not imply the absence of force or of aggression. It is, as it were, an ethical stylization of embodiment, replete with gestures and modes of non-action, ways of becoming an obstacle, of using the solidity of the body and its proprioceptive object field to block or derail a further exercise of violence. When, for instance, bodies form a human barrier, we can ask whether they are blocking force or engaging in force.¹⁷ Here, again, we are obligated to think carefully about the direction of force, and to seek to make operative a distinction between bodily force and violence. Sometimes, it may seem that obstruction is violence—we do, after all, speak about violent obstruction—so one question that will be important to consider is whether bodily acts of resistance involve a mindfulness of the tipping point, the site where the force of resistance can become the violent act or practice that commits a fresh injustice. The possibility for this kind of ambiguity should not dissuade us of the value of this kind of practice. Fourth, there is no practice of nonviolence that does not negotiate fundamental ethical and political ambiguities, which means that “nonviolence” is not an absolute principle, but the name of an ongoing struggle.

If nonviolence seems like a “weak” position, we should ask: What counts as strength? How often do we see that strength is equated with the exercise of violence or the indication of a willingness to use violence? If there is a strength in nonviolence that emerges from this putative “weakness,” it may be related to the powers of the weak, which include the social and political power to establish existence for those who have been conceptually nullified, to achieve grievability and value for those who have been cast as dispensable, and to insist on the possibility of both judgment and justice within the terms of contemporary media and public policy that offer a bewildering and sometimes quite tactical

vocabulary for naming and misnaming violence.

The fact that political efforts of dissent and critique are often labeled as “violent” by the very state authorities that are threatened by those efforts is not a reason to despair of language use. It means only that we have to expand and refine the political vocabulary for thinking about violence and the resistance to violence, taking account of how that vocabulary is twisted and used to shield violent authorities against critique and opposition. When the critique of continuing colonial violence is deemed violent (Palestine), when a petition for peace is recast as an act of war (Turkey), when struggles for equality and freedom are construed as violent threats to state security (Black Lives Matter), or when “gender” is portrayed as a nuclear arsenal directed against the family (anti-gender ideology), then we are operating in the midst of politically consequential forms of phantasmagoria. To expose the ruse and strategy of those positions, we have to be in a position to track the ways that violence is reproduced at the level of a defensive rationale imbued with paranoia and hatred.

Nonviolence is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity. When the precarious expose their living status to those powers that threaten their very lives, they engage a form of persistence that holds the potential to defeat one of the guiding aims of violent power—namely, to cast those on the margins as dispensable, to push them beyond the margins into the zone of non-being, to use Fanon’s phrase. When nonviolent movements work within the ideals of radical egalitarianism, it is the equal claim to a livable and grievable life that serves as a guiding social ideal, one that is fundamental to an ethics and politics of nonviolence that moves beyond the legacy of individualism. It opens up a new consideration of social freedom as defined in part by our constitutive interdependency. An egalitarian imaginary is required for such a struggle—one that reckons with the potential for destruction in every living bond. Violence against the other is, in this sense, violence against oneself, something that becomes clear when we recognize that violence assaults the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world.

Notes

Introduction

1 See “The Political Scope of Non-Violence,” in Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi: On Non-Violence*, New York: New Directions, 1965, 65–78.

2 For an overview of nonviolent actions, see Gene Sharp, *How Nonviolent Struggle Works*, Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2013.

3 Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

4 For statistics on “justifiable” police homicides of African Americans, see “Black Lives Matter: Race, Policing, and Protest,” Wellesley Research Guides, libguides.wellesley.edu/blacklivesmatter/statistics.

5 See “Gezi Park Protests 2013: Overview,” University of Pennsylvania Libraries Guides, guides.library.upenn.edu/Gezi_Park.

6 See “Academics for Peace,” Frontline Defenders official website, frontlinedefenders.org.

7 For a full discussion of resistance, including its paradoxical formulations, see Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

8 Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre: Une philosophie de la violence*, Paris: La Découverte, 2017.

9 Ibid.

10 See Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1947; Étienne Balibar, “Reflections on Gewalt,” *Historical Materialism* 17:1, 2009; Yves Winter, “Debating Violence on the Desert Island: Engels, Dühring and Robinson Crusoe,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 13:4, 2014; Nick Hewlett, “Marx, Engels, and the Ethics of Violence in Revolt,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 17:7, 2012, and *Blood and Progress: Violence in Pursuit of Emancipation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

11 For a contrasting view, see scott crow, ed., *Setting Sights: Histories and Reflections on Community*

Armed Self-Defense, Oakland: PM Press, 2018.

12 Dorlin, *Se défendre*, 41–64.

13 Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004; Walter Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und Aender Aufsätze*, Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 1965.

14 See my “Protest, Violent, Nonviolent,” *Public Books*, October 13, 2017, publicbooks.org.

15 Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, New York: Routledge, 2010.

16 See Mahatma Gandhi’s defense of the nonviolence of the Satyagraha Movement before the Disorders Inquiry Committee in 1920, two years prior to his imprisonment: “Satyagraha differs from passive resistance as North Pole to South. The latter has been conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence for the purpose of gaining one’s end, whereas the former has been conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any shape or form,” in Mahatma Gandhi, *Selected Political Writings*, ed. Dennis Dalton, Hackett Publishing, 1996, 6. See also Martin Luther King, Jr., “Stride Toward Freedom” where nonviolence is described as a “method,” “a weapon,” and a mode of “resistance” that relies on an enduring faith in the future. Influenced by Gandhi, King also drew inspiration from Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience.” See also Leela Fernandes, “Beyond Retribution: The Transformative Possibilities of Nonviolence” in *Transforming Feminist Practice*, San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Press, 2003.

17 See Başak Ertür, “Barricades: Resources and Residues of Resistance,” in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds., *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 97–121; see also Banu Bargu, “The Silent Exception: Hunger Striking and Lip-Sewing,” *Law, Culture, and the Humanities*, May 2017.

1. Nonviolence, Grievability, and the Critique of Individualism

1 See Mary Whiton Calkins, “Militant Pacifism,” *International Journal of Ethics* 28:1, 1917.

2 Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

3 Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, eds. Lloyd Easton and Kurt Guddat, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967, 288–9.

4 According to Gregory Sadler, there is “a rhetorical construct ‘state of nature’ as war of all against all, lacking any institutions of civilization and civil society; Historically existent ‘state(s) of nature’ in pre-political societies, where family, patron-client, clan, or tribal structures are in conflict with each other; Historically existent ‘state(s) of nature’ within established civil societies where, despite establishment and enforcement of laws, citizens remain in a mistrustful condition vis-à-vis each other, i.e. concerned about criminality; The historically existent ‘state of nature’ governing foreign relations, i.e. the condition of states in relation to each other; Historically existent and possible ‘state(s)’ of nature that culminate in civil war with the breakdown of civil society through factionalization.” Gregory Sadler, “Five States of Nature in Hobbes’s Leviathan,” *Oxford Philosopher*, March 2016.

5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. C. E. Vaughan, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1915, 286.

6 Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1967, 314.