

Book Review

REVIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS
Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2020, liv-lviii
DOI: 10.35994/rhr.v6i1.138



Judith Butler. *The force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-political Bind*. Verso, 2020. (224 Pages, ISBN 9781788732765)

Defining 'violence' and its adjectival form 'violent' can be a problematic task. From usage of one's freedom of speech in such ways as harm people's feelings and of other bodily means to inflict pain, to that imposed by the system via economic and legal structures, 'violence' or 'violent' behaviour has been explicated along varying lines, implying that it's a 'labile' phenomenon. Language is one such tool that can be used to perpetrate 'violence', and when taken to by the state, it superimposes its monopoly over its masses. Therefore, any version of the same language that tries to lay bare, and question, undue authority and abuses is dubbed 'violent' even if the dissenting voices doesn't include any traces of such 'violence' in them as would merit a hard-line response on the state's part. In so doing, the state considers all the more justiciable employment of robust force and taking to intimidation so as to curb dissent. Judith Butler contends how in order to justifiably employ force upon a certain target, the latter is first defined as a (potential) threat likely to cause violence.

Humans requiring sociability

The primary argument of the book is that humans are social and relational beings, dependent upon one another for their material sustenance and development. As a result, an environment of interdependence is created that, to some degree, strips them of their urge to do each other harm. The notion of individuation is one that, despite being one of capitalist societies' primary aims, diverts one's attention from collectivism to the fulfilment of individual needs. Ironically, this attitude continues to make inroads into the world of today where entrepreneurial tendencies bolster self-maximisation. This, as Butler considers, looms large

primarily in societies that are technologically developed and in those where men enjoy a dominant role.

Individual sovereignty comes at the cost of abandoning one's utterly inborn condition—the latter's being dependence upon one's immediate environment and family. It is an undeniable proposition that isolation can prove for our growth an immensely negative force owing to our not, per Simone de Beauvoir, having been born as individuals but as beings. It is hence a prerequisite for those around us to attend to our needs and ascertain for us such an environment as would enable our growth and survival. Our perceived need and want to individuate, conversely, can yield in awful repercussions for the society-at-large.

Less a moral issue and more an ethical one

A profound novelty of this book is how Butler regards nonviolence as an issue that has little to do with morality and more with societal ethics that explicate its parameters. She further maintains that whilst we talk about nonviolence along moral lines, we tend to address two issues that are central to the debate: one, to not end or destroy lives; two, our obligation to indiscriminately preserve life. Our observations, however, render us cognisant of the fact that 'we' doesn't include all of us, thanks to the heinous and exclusionary cultural practices that reek of the propagation of opprobrium for 'others', of not a single tear shed upon their loss. This by and large finds roots in ideologies whose implicit aim it is to inculcate into people a complex of superiority for themselves and the antithesis of it for those who choose to not let the course of their lives be determined by superannuated teachings or to be guided by teachings of the kind that don't fall along the lines of what is believed in far and wide.

Nonviolence, on the contrary, purports to rid the society of such prejudice and the practices that leave people deficient of their natural urge to portray sympathy irrespective of who requires it. It also furthers the conception of adopting a human-centred apparatus and iterates that all lives, albeit otherwise disrespected, are grievable. This, oftentimes, comes at the cost of having to stand opposition from the cultural forces that want

society to stay passive, and it is with tenacious resistance that, as contends Butler, we shall sooner or later overhaul them.

Planned aggression and nonviolence can go hand in hand

Debunking the myth of equanimity, she argues that rage can be levelled at the perpetrators under the strict condition that it doesn't ensue in the production of rage kindred to the one it stands in opposition to. Such an attitude ideally connotes that in one's quest to stand a wrong, another wrong oughtn't be committed. Any—response—that, thus, abides by kindred methods as the perpetrators' does the society little credit and, in lieu, increments the severity of the violence already rampant.

It would, moreover, be sheer naivety to disregard aggression, however calculated, in response to violence; for it is an impulse exacerbated every time a harm is felt. It is aggression that delineates there brooding over the victim a desire for revenge, which, if not crafted profoundly, can bring about an increase in the violence predominating the air. It is, for this reason and beyond, significant and an ethical obligation that aggression be fashioned in ways as would withstand violence and make certain a novel future of social equality. Racial violence in the US is one such example that Butler posits, only to be laid bare later by the BLM movement conducted across the country on a mass scale.

Relevant to this, Gandhi, who is said to have introduced the conception of nonviolence in the Subcontinent having, per Jordan Peterson, acquired it from the Russian giant Leo Tolstoy, said that for as long as the use of arms or physical force broods large, the force of one's soul can't find for itself the requisite space to unleash a profound response. In barer words, unplanned aggression and the use of means similar to those taken to by culprits of violence can't go hand in hand with the force that lies within.

Equality as the cardinal feature of nonviolence

Where certain lives are valued, only certain are grieved. This inequality is advanced in the wake of the racism, misogyny, and outright degradation of the downtrodden evidently apparent across societies. In what follows, the negation of the rights of those whose worth is reduced to that of a bare life (to use Giorgio

Agamben's term), meant to serve and labour throughout the course of their lives, and only to be discarded upon their death becomes inevitable. Violence, the aforementioned premise implies, is discriminatory.

Nonviolence stands opposed to its reverse; for the conception that the sanctity of all lives regardless of all affiliations ought to be ascertained necessitates an approach that guarantees equality and inclusivity, blanketing every life the efforts of whose inculcation into the realm of grievability is as much an obligation as it is a moral prerequisite.

Conclusion

As a critique of individualism requiring on our part a quest for rethinking the societal bonds that are innate to us, nonviolence doesn't imply an outright renunciation of one's own desires and conscience, but a resistance to systematic violence and racism and a candid struggle for the due consideration of every life as liveable and grievable. This ideal ought to then serve the society-at-large as a regulatory social ideal necessitating a cognition of humans' intrinsic need to volitionally stand any such advancements against the self as harm it or reduce it to the status of degradation. Through so doing, we shall also be able to enfeeble the economic and institutional discriminations that degrade certain lives, leaving them with nothing but an urge to resist force with force. The latter approach, in turn, allows the state the authority to further its fascist and discriminatory policies overtly without having to confront mass opposition, and so such an opportunity mustn't be provided to it.

Last, Freud may have depicted his lack of conviction in reason's ability to direct and restrain murderous wishes, but I still believe one oughtn't dispense with reason; for it is the latter that instils into our hearts indiscriminate love for people and the indispensable knowledge of the mayhem violence and exclusionary attitudes have wrecked throughout the course of history. And this love, if not guided by reason, can have grave repercussions for the humankind.

The profundity of this masterpiece can be gauged by how it not only offers a relinquishment of the misconceptions adhering

to nonviolence fostered by those who perpetrate the opposite of it, but also as to how it addresses some of the fundamentally intrinsic issues that have become part of the nonviolence discourse. If taken to in earnest, this can serve as a perfect ideal for states across the globe to bring forth such policies as accord every life an equal, worthy of considerateness, and disregard any that enhance discrimination and render lives worthless.

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