

# ‘The Force of Nonviolence’ review: The ethics of nonviolence in political resistance

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A brilliant philosophical analysis is marred by theories limited to the imagination, failing to link a radical politics to reality

The categories violence and nonviolence pose enormous philosophical and ethical challenges. Consider marginal groups like racial minorities, refugees, and LGBTQ persons assembling on the streets to express their dissent. Now the state’s response is to immediately call out their public demonstrations as violent and invoke the defence of society as a justification to use the police and army against its opponents. Indeed, we must ask: who gets to name and define what is “violent”?

## State violence

The American philosopher and feminist, Judith Butler, makes a major advancement in the debates on nonviolence in her latest book, *The Force of Nonviolence*. She argues that to understand nonviolence one has to first admit that attributing something as violence is predetermined within interpretive frames which confer the state a monopoly to characterise any resistance as “violent”. Butler captures the need to move beyond a limited view of violence in terms of either just a physical blow or between two parties, to the coercive structural and institutional frameworks which expand and clarify the hidden nature of violence (of the state).

At stake for Butler is an idea about recuperating an ethics of nonviolence and situating it within political resistance. If her starting premise is a critique of naming practices of “violence,” she underscores that violence and inequality are related. In other words, violence originates within unequal social structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This fundamentally establishes that “violence imperils social ties” by occluding social bonds that constitute us as living creatures. Butler launches a critique of individualism and argues that nonviolence is a social practice of resistance to systemic forms of domination, thereby emerging precisely in its encounter with systemic violence.

## Radical equality

Butler moves beyond the framework of legal rights of protection to claim that nonviolence must have a commitment to a radical form of equality that imposes an obligation to recognise all lives are intricately bound with each other. This builds from her earlier works which critically look at the way Israel’s war against Palestine and the U.S. war in Afghanistan are

represented, where some lives are made to seem more grievable than the others when they are lost.

Arguing for an equal grievability of all lives, she states that all life, including the non-human, is socially interdependent with one another. She rejects arguments that justify violence on the basis of self-preservation and self-defence because it fails to recognise that the self is intrinsically related with the other: violence against another is also violence against oneself.

What leads us to preserve the life of the other? Butler's analysis combines social-political action and psychoanalytic resources to observe that the notion of "substitution" can explain that all lives are implicated. In this scheme, impulses of aggression or guilt can be productive, since it can potentially reverse scenes of loss and reparation when the other is seen as an inseparable part of me. For instance, whatever I am doing to the other can in turn be the result of an unconscious impulse of what I myself suffer.

Butler asserts that expressions of anger and rage can be redirected into an "aggressive nonviolence". Nonviolence is not something passive, but it is a deliberate force that struggles against the very violence encircling us. To put simply, she alludes to scenes of public protests in which the body's force is put on the line to block the police and state power.

### **Lacks ethical practices**

However, her progressive commitments raise an inconsistency between nonviolence as an extreme form of assertion by groups contesting state power as against nonviolence as mode of living. The tension is between confining nonviolence to public and political protests and that of self-transformation. While the latter need not exclude the former, the former certainly limits the latter to an adversarial contest. A further difficulty with Butler's approach is that the nature of modern violence is not a monopoly of the state, it is diffuse and widespread. For thinkers like Gandhi, violence fundamentally obstructed the ability to know oneself. So, nonviolence was a means of self-transformation for everybody irrespective of where they were in the social power relations.

An underlying limitation in Butler's work is a clear absence of any mechanism for sound ethical action. For Gandhi, ahimsa was part of traditional and spiritual exercises. These practices ultimately prepared an individual with a practical wisdom of action implying good judgment and foresight. Butler's account lacks any such connection with a real conduct and instead constructs a nonviolence only in the realm of imagination.

In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler opens a new consideration in the field of nonviolent studies founded within our prior social relations, which redirects impulses from our inner psychic life in crafting nonviolent social action. Butler accords marginal groups an agency to resist violence by publicly re-enacting its own subjection. Yet, despite her brilliant philosophical analysis and courage, her theories are limited to a radical politics that is unable to explain vast forms of action beyond interactions with the state.

*The Force of Nonviolence*; **Judith Butler**, Verso, ₹1,449.

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