

Richard J. Bernstein

Violence: Thinking without Banisters.

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Richard J. Bernstein's *Violence: Thinking without Banisters* approaches questions of violence through chapters devoted to five influential authors on the subject. Each chapter provides historical context on the author and text under consideration, and a close reading of relevant texts. In the concluding chapter, Bernstein reviews his argument and offers some general conclusions.

The first chapter is devoted to Carl Schmitt and the question 'what do we learn from Schmitt about enmity and violence?' (15). According to Bernstein, 'part of the attraction of Schmitt to left thinkers is that he provides sharp weapons for criticizing and exposing the normativism and rationalism' of liberalism (14), and his thinking is defended for its so-called 'tough minded concrete existential political realism' (29). But it is here that Bernstein detects the aporia in Schmitt's thought. For Schmitt criticizes the 'pacifism that advocates a war to end all wars' (29) and 'condemns the type of unlimited enmity of liberal humanitarianism that "justifies" the annihilation of the enemy' (35). As these criticisms involve 'appeals to normative-moral considerations' (29), Bernstein does not believe that Schmitt has 'the conceptual resources to distinguish limited from unlimited enmity [nor] to condemn the latter' (35). Schmitt's writings amount to a 'misleading and deceptive fusion of descriptive categories and normative-moral categories' (36). It would seem, then, that nothing can be learned about violence and enmity from Schmitt. While 'Schmitt has been highly effective in demonstrating... a disturbing growth and spread of absolute enmity' in which 'there is a real possibility of unleashing a violence that destroys the political and social order' (44), he is 'of little help in confronting... fundamental problems' such as 'what we mean by dehumanization and how we ought to try to limit enmity' (44-45). In fact, Schmitt 'dismisses... the very possibility of seriously confronting them' (45). If there is something to be learned from Schmitt, it would seem to be only that we must abandon the commitment to the value-neutral theoretical standpoint Schmitt claims to adopt.

The second chapter deals with Walter Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence'. Bernstein discusses, and notes the difficulties to understanding, some of the main distinctions proposed by Benjamin in the essay, such as 'law-preserving' and 'law-making' violence, and divine and mythic violence. Bernstein believes 'any interpretation of Benjamin's essay ultimately depends on what we determine he means by divine violence' (56), and proceeds to discuss influential interpretations from Marcuse, Butler, Critchley, Zizek, Derrida, and Rose (among others given less attention). The meaning of divine violence is central to each, but they differ on its ultimate meaning. The result of these diverse interpretations, for Bernstein, is that 'Benjamin's remarks about divine violence are too condensed, opaque, and elliptical to interpret in any definitive manner' (72). The 'value' of the text, its 'fascination' and 'allure', resides 'in the questions that it opens up and compels us to confront ... questions that any critique of violence must confront' (76). The readings by Butler and Critchley are notable in that Bernstein returns to their claims in the conclusion. While he rejects their interpretation of the meaning of divine violence, he partially affirms an aspect of their interpretation that holds the commandment not to kill as a guideline that imposes an ethical demand to struggle with the responsibility of whether or not to abandon the commandment and make use of violence in exceptional circumstances (60-61). Bernstein, however, denies that this struggle ought to take place

in the solitude of ethical reflection, and would prefer that such questions take place in the public space of speech and persuasion (183).

The third chapter, on Hannah Arendt, focuses on a number of key distinctions in her thought: between power and violence, between liberty and freedom, and between liberation and revolution. The point of these distinctions, in Bernstein's view, is a function of Arendt's 'exaggerated thinking' (97), that it encourages us 'to see, understand, and appreciate something that we are in danger of forgetting—that power and action are distorted when we fuse power and violence' (98). It also 'provides critical standards for judging what we are doing and what is happening to us ... that enable us to see what we otherwise would not see' (99). While violence and power are antithetical in Arendt's argument, violence 'is not intrinsically negative' (92) and 'may be required to achieve liberty, which is itself the necessary condition for public freedom' (101). The problem with violence is when it seeks to legitimate itself, as often happens when the 'mentality [of *homo faber*] becomes all-pervasive' (92). Bernstein shows that Arendt accepted the use of violence under certain conditions, for instance, as 'necessary to constitute the Jewish people as a political community' during the time she advocated forming a Jewish army to fight the Nazi regime (102). But Arendt failed to thematize 'the difficult issue of when, and under what circumstances, [violence] can be justified' (101). Bernstein supplements this by stating that if violence can be justified under certain circumstances, 'then the justification for the use of violence ought to be a political issue ... precisely the sort of issue that ought to be open to debate, deliberation, and persuasion by those who contemplate employing violent means to achieve liberty from oppressive rulers' (101).

The fourth chapter, on Frantz Fanon, complements the previous chapter. Bernstein argues that 'Fanon [is] engaging in a critique of violence' (106) in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. Bernstein understands critique to have three aspects: depth analysis, a determination of the limits of the phenomenon, and revolutionary praxis (106-7). Bernstein claims that Fanon represents the three aspects of critique by providing depth analysis of how colonial violence 'violently fabricate[s] the colonized subjects' and 'shape[s] the psyche of the colonized' (122). Fanon's critique determines the limits of violence first by indicating 'there are no limits... of the violence... by the colonists' but there is 'emphasis on the limits of the violence of the colonized' (123). The limit is that decolonial violence must be in the service of *liberation*, and channeled rather than let loose. Finally, the critique is a form of revolutionary praxis in that the text itself is addressed to the oppressed throughout the world and speaks of the need 'to overthrow the entrenched violence of the colonizers' (125). Bernstein is critical of Fanon's supposed romanticization of 'the people' and 'rural masses', as well as for failing to provide 'guidance about what is to be done once independence is achieved, in order to realize concretely the type of new society that he envisions' (126). But he supports the overall 'goal of ending once and for all time, colonial violence—the violence of the colonists and colonized' (127). Arendt and Fanon complement each other, then, as the latter argues that the violence of '[e]liminating colonialism is only a necessary condition for achieving true liberation' (121), while the former argues there are certain occasions when violence is justified as a means to public freedom, but if it is necessary, it is never sufficient.

The penultimate chapter, on Jan Assman, is primarily concerned with 'how the Mosaic distinction is related to religious violence' (133). The Mosaic distinction is 'the distinction between true and false in religion' (129); it inaugurates an exclusive 'revolutionary monotheism' that 'introduces... a new kind of violence: religious violence' (144). Does this mean the Mosaic distinction itself entails violence? Bernstein believes Assman's answers to this question are deficient, but also that they 'open a new way of thinking about the so-called "post-secular" age and the ever

present danger of religious violence’ (144). Assman believes that the distinction is *potentially* violent, but rejects the essentialist view that would have violence follow as a necessary consequence of the Mosaic distinction (145). Assman's intention is to suggest that ‘we ought to make the Mosaic distinction an incessant object of reflection and redefinition’; he does not want to ‘revoke’ the distinction (154). His critique of religious violence, following Freud, is that the potential violence implied by the Mosaic distinction is the price paid in order to purchase ‘exodus’ and ‘enlightenment’ (147). In Assman's view, ‘only through a complete rejection of violence is monotheism able to fulfill its liberating mission of forming an alternative counter power to the totalizing claims of the political’ (156). Bernstein, however, does not believe this follows ‘from what he has taught us about the Mosaic distinction and revolutionary monotheism’ (154). This is because the potential for violence cannot be removed; violence remains latent in the Mosaic distinction and can always return with a vengeance. For Bernstein, this means optimistic accounts of progress since the Enlightenment would do well to remember that ‘there is a constant task to oppose the actualization of this potential violence, to subject the Mosaic distinction to “incessant reflection and redefinition”’ (158).

The concluding chapter reviews the preceding chapters, offering some general conclusions and raising questions for further study. One general point is worth mentioning. Bernstein states that his ‘main concern throughout this study has been... with the ways in which different types of violence easily turn into, or sanction, physical violence’, for instance, ‘when potential religious violence turns into actual violence’ (177). The overall message from Bernstein is that this potential cannot be eliminated; the use of violence can be neither disavowed nor justified a priori. But because of this inescapable possibility, it is all the more urgent for a political space to exist in which one can oppose its actualization, or debate the merits of using violence in particular circumstances. Without a corresponding political space in which this possibility can be negotiated, ‘there is nothing left to prevent the triumph of violence’ (184). But this conclusion raises a new question: where such political space is absent, does violence not already triumph?

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