

Philosophy in Review



Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "Violence and Political Theory."

Lantz Fleming Miller

Volume 41, numéro 2, mai 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078051ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078051ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Miller, L. (2021). Compte rendu de [Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, "Violence and Political Theory."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(2), 65–67.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078051ar>

Copyright © Lantz Fleming Miller, 2021



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings. *Violence and Political Theory*. Polity 2020. 224 pp. \$77.95 CAD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509536719); \$27.95 CAD (Paperback ISBN 9781509536726).

Violence seems to be such that, once it has set in, it is hard to extract. Getting rid of violence appears to require violence. It reproduces only itself. Peace appears but a sheep exposed to predators. If the world were to abruptly become peaceful, it would only await the next Thrasymachus to reimpose tyranny. This sticky nature of violence and how to cope with it are the most potent themes of this much-needed work. It provides a fair though critical overview of the subject of politics and violence through history.

Violence and Political Theory examines a judicious selection of political thinkers, from Hobbes and Locke to Gandhi and Ruddick. The volume offers an unprecedentedly thorough, solid, and systematic review of some of the most prominent and influential outlooks on political violence. Twenty-six thinkers are given chapter sections on the role of violence, whether excusing or decrying it. A few other authors, such as Augustine, receive respectful mention. Moreover, while the review sections are conscientious and thorough, they reach beyond passive review, providing critical commentary on how well these theories work individually and compare with one another. By the end, they provide original insight into the ancient debate and possible solutions to problems of understanding and, ideally, one day stuffing political violence into a dusty corner of history.

Violence enters political theory at different points in political philosophy. Locke, Marx, and Engels see violence entering politics inevitably in revolution. The only way to overcome oppressive forces permanently is to get rid of them, and they do not relinquish easily. Once these oppressors are vanquished and freedom and justice insured, the ensuing social condition is so fulfilling as to protect from internal disruption. Another plane of violence in the polity is that of retaining statehood, as Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Weber argued. Insofar as life outside of statehood is worse, states must exert some degree of violence. They offer shelters against the blasts of natural and regressive human forces. Law, needed against chaos, must be enforced to sustain itself; enforcement often turns violent. The threat of external incursion means a well-entrenched and disciplined military, which Machiavelli praises, considering the civilization that it preserves. Benjamin and Arendt began reconsidering the role of violence in revolutionary action and state-maintenance. Benjamin aims ‘to rethink the deadly logic of revolution’ (68). Arendt considers that such endeavor to rethink revolution requires ‘a novel conception of political power’ (68) that would not descend into totalitarianism and imperialism.

Foucault and Derrida dissect the social ontology of violence, revealing how violence ineluctably permeates politics beyond revolution and state formation. These acts only unleash, perpetuate, and exacerbate violence, extending it beyond the direct and structural violence associated with the state and into symbolic and epistemic violence. The psychological violence wreaked through symbols and knowledge control results in injury as profound as direct physical violence. Foucault’s analysis leaves the political condition so inexorable, the prospect for individual citizens so hopeless, that it is hard to tell whether he embraces it. Derrida can also seem resigned to the inevitability of politics as the continuation of violence. As Frazer and Hutchins note, to him even ‘ostensibly non-violent philosophy is a sham’ (95). But he offers an ethical stance, allowing ‘an evaluative distinction between better and worse, greater and lesser violence’ (95). Further, ‘we (all) must take the measure of the violence that our philosophy or our actions ... involve ... We should engage with and take responsibility for the lesser violence’ (95).

The struggle to implement anarchy is another portal into violence’s role in political struggle. Anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, and Tolstoy were also activists. These first three,

who served sentences for their activities, advocated some degree of violence as necessary to extricate the violence embedded in state powers. Tolstoy, adamantly pacifist and individualist, advocated ‘radical individualism’ (127) and maintained that anarchy could not coexist with violence even in establishing it. ‘[T]he impulse to control even evil is itself evil’ (123). His objection to states was their authoritarianism and offense to individuality, justifying themselves by their alleged inevitability. ‘One course therefore remains—to fight the Government by means of thought, speech, action’ (124).

Yet, violence can be viewed as part of transforming humanity, a goal of Gandhi’s and Fanon’s in their different ways. Both ‘focus explicitly on questions of sex, gender, war, and revolution’ (133)—issues rarely discussed together as part of a tight interweaving of social life. Certainly, Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* made the connection between war, peace, and gender. Plato saw the need for gender equality in forming a just republic. But since then, for all the discussions of violence and politics, scant attention is given to the connection between gender and violence and politics. The rise of feminism since the late 18th century would by the 20th century explode in full efflorescence, revealing the extent of gender and violence in politics. Gandhi went far in this connection by adopting an androgenous manner and nonviolent stance. As with Tolstoy, the core of Gandhi’s approach was self-rule, autonomy, which could be achieved only by recognizing equality for half the adult population. Colonialism, too, is gendered insofar as a masculinized outsider force overcomes a passive feminized native culture. Fanon’s program for transformation defies colonialism’s injustice, yet violence is the only recourse against oppressors. The Algerians’s vanquishing the French corroborated his stance on violence’s necessity for full freedom. He soon recognized women’s sometimes violent role in the struggle. However, their ‘embrace of violence is not the same as mens’ (148). ‘The woman ceased to be a complement for man. She literally forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength’ so there is ‘no going back [for] this new politics’ (147).

Gender and war also became a crucial issue for feminists such as Addams, Ruddick, and Elshtain. Activist and thinker Addams, like Dewey, saw that moral compulsion for social reform works not upon ‘fixed truths but rather ongoing and permanently revisable outcomes of historical and social change’ (153). Addams defied the supposed fixed truth of war’s omnipresence. Thus, ‘the dogmatic morality of war, in which all humanly tangible distinctions between normal and abnormal disappear’ (155). ‘War is a set of institutions, identities, values, and practices that cannot be detached from a variety of institutions’ and such, ‘including class and gender politics’ (154). Militarization manifests itself outside of war. By the First World War, pacifist feminism was taking hold, some seeing ‘violence as a male principle’ (156). Other feminists renounced pacificism, as ‘the idea that any deep and necessary link between feminism and pacificism simply reproduced the very ideology of gender differences’ (159). Ruddick sees her views as not pacificism but ‘anti-war feminism’ (161). Positively, she encourages ‘maternal thinking’ as a model for thought in the broader context. We can apply social practices and ideals encountered in mothering and child to the society as a whole. These offer a model for handling power relations, as in that between parent and child, which itself can be a source of tension and violence. Maternal thinkers may be neither feminists or pacifists, and some maternal thinkers have supported war. But ‘it is unnecessary and divisive to require all peacemakers an absolute commitment not to kill’ (163).

Elshtain eloquently sums up this dilemma concerning war and feminism: ‘Since its inception, feminism has not quite known whether to fight men or join them, whether to lament sex differences and deny their importance, or acknowledge and even valorize such differences, whether to condemn all wars outright or extol women’s contributions to war efforts’ (166). While all war is tragic, worse is allowing gross injustices to proliferate unchecked. ‘[T]he meaning of political violence cannot be

reduced to, but is always anchored by, the phenomenon of direct physical violence' (187). In turn, 'physical violence powerfully illustrates how political violence exemplifies and enacts radically asymmetric relations of power and subjection' (187). Political violence emerges as a complex human construction, which must inform any inquiry into the use of violence to fight violence. Instead of accepting that political violence is justifiable, we should look beyond the present status of violence and to the 'domain of possibility' (190).

The book works well in tracing thought on political use of violence. Despite such strength, it could be improved. For one, its own final proposal for better founding the study of violence and politics deserves more exploration. What might that 'domain of possibility' encompass? Also, the historical retrospective on the subject could well bring in earlier figures as Socrates and Mencius. A related issue is the social structure's violence, as in environmental and consumeristic offenses. A society can usefully be viewed as an agent, which can wreak quite violent destruction. Finally, I quibble on the use of 'feminine' and 'masculine' early in the book, as in the discussion of Machiavelli. Attributing the gendered valuing of *virtù* as masculine in contrast to *fortuna* as feminine in Machiavelli's day can seem anachronistic. It even sets a precedent in which *virtù* is, in essence, a masculine trait, while mere succumbing to *fortuna* is essentially feminine. Such anachronistic genderism may weaken the case for such traits being arbitrary and inessential.

Lantz Fleming Miller, Ashoka University