

Critique(s) of Violence

Syllabus

2st semester 2020/21, block 2

MA Political and Social Philosophy

Online-Course (zoom-link on Canvas)

ECTS: 6

Professor: dr. Daniel Loick

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Time: Wednesdays, 9-12 h

First session April 7th, last session May 19th

Objectives

After successfully completing this course, students will

- have familiarized themselves with canonical classical and contemporary approaches in critical theory,
- be able to apply these approaches in order to analyze hidden forms of violence embedded in our political routines,
- have improved their analytical and hermeneutical skills.

Content

A century ago, in the winter of 1920/21, Walter Benjamin penned his essay "Critique of Violence," which has lost none of its fascination today, despite (or perhaps because of) its apodictic style, its opaque use of metaphor, and its erratic argumentation. During the last 30 years, it has become a common point of reference for an array of disciplines that are concerned with scope, shape, and function of the different forms of violence associated with the modern nation state as well as with perspectives of overcoming them. In addition, in the last decade or so, a new strand of critical theory has emerged that under the banner of "abolition" formulates a radical critique of state-sanctioned violence (prison, police, borders). In this class, we will carefully examine Benjamin's original text, explore its political context, become familiar with the major positions of the reception of the essay, and discuss its political relevance today. We will then attempt a dialogue with contemporary critiques of violence.

We will read, among others, Agamben, Benjamin, Butler, Cavarero, Davis, Derrida, Gago, Gilmore, Hartman, and Menke.

Recommended prior knowledge

General basic knowledge about critical theories (especially the Frankfurt School, Marxist and Anarchist thought) is an advantage, but not required.

You should bring enthusiasm and curiosity about contemporary social and political problems. The class requires patience and endurance with reading difficult texts, as well as willingness to apply critical theory to concrete contemporary political issues.

Format

Due to the corona-crisis, this course will be an online course. The zoom link will be in the canvas course page.

It is absolutely essential to read the assigned texts thoroughly. The texts will be made available through Canvas.

You are highly encouraged to form independent reading groups to continue the class discussion, as well as to present drafts of your papers to each other. You can find a board for contact ads under “pages” on canvas.

Examen

In order to successfully complete this course, you have to:

- Attend class regularly and well prepared and actively participate in class discussion.
- We will use the program Perusall (on canvas) to collaboratively read the texts. You will find a few reading hints there to help you structure the reading, as well as some initial questions and comments. Each student can add more questions, answer somebody else’s question, start or contribute to a discussion, or include links to background information or further reading. In order to pass the course, you have to engage with each text at least 2 times (it can be a question, comment, etc.). The assessment of Perusall is on a pass/fail basis.
- *Either:*
 - Write Field Notes: Each week, submit a short text (500-700 words) about a sighting of an instance of violence you made that week. It can be something you experienced yourself, bore witness to, read in the newspaper, saw in a film, etc. You should use one (or more) of the texts from the syllabus to describe, explain or elucidate the phenomenon you are describing. The field notes can be essayistic in style but should be pointed and theoretically informed. It is also possible to work on the field notes together, in that case the required length increases accordingly.
 - Write a final paper (about 3000-4000 words). You should send me an abstract for the paper in the last week of the semester.

Deadline for submission for the field notes portfolio and the paper (via email) is 4.6.2021. The final grade of the class will be based solely on the field notes / the paper.

- Please take notice of UvA’s regulations on plagiarism and fraud.

Class climate

Creating a respectful, inclusive and attentive atmosphere in the (virtual) classroom is the shared responsibility of teacher and students. This includes reflecting on the different backgrounds, experiences and social positionings among the participants, a sensibility with regard to one's own conduct in the classroom, and an openness towards other perspectives and opinions. The seminar aims at including all students and thus attempts to reduce structural disadvantages.

Trigger warning: Some texts contain drastic depictions of violence, such as sexualized violence, racist violence, and torture, that some students may find disturbing. You might want to emotionally prepare yourselves for this content. You can recuse yourself for individual sessions; however, you should then contact me to agree for alternative readings for you for that week. I ask all participants to help create an atmosphere of respect and sensitivity.

The corona-situation poses extraordinary challenges to teachers and students alike (health problems, care obligations, financial problems, access to university facilities, etc.). It cannot be expected to carry out "regular" education under these circumstances. Please let me know if you have special needs or problems with the online teaching situation. We will try to work out a solution together.

Please contact me with any discomfort with regard to the class climate.

Program

7.4. *Toward a Critique of Violence*

- Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence", *Selected Writings* Vol. 1 (edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings), Cambridge 1996: Belknap, pp. 236-252

Background

Daniel Loick, "Benjamin and Abolition",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtU1xIdcm1I>

14.4. *Revolution and Violence*

- V.I. Lenin, "Class Society and the State", *The State and Revolution*, Chicago 2014: Haymarket, pp. 41-58
- Gustav Landauer, "What does the Socialist Bund Want?", "The Socialist Way", "The Settlement", "Socialist Beginning", *Revolution and Other Writings*, Oakland: pm press, pp. 188-205
- Frantz Fanon, "On Violence", *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York 2004: Grove, pp. 1-21

Background

Mathijs van de Sande, "Prefigurative Politics",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAOkBtClXEk&t=1131s>

21.4. *Law and Violence*

- Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'", Drucilla Cornell et al. (eds): *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London/New York: Routledge, part I, pp. 3-28
- Giorgio Agamben, "Gigantomachy Concerning a Void", *State of Exception*, Chicago 2005: University of Chicago Press, pp. 52-64
- Christoph Menke, "The Relief of Law", *Law and Violence. Christoph Menke in Dialogue*, Manchester 2018: Manchester University Press, pp. 33-61

Background

Christoph Menke, "Is there nonviolent action?",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWW1h-1hD2I&t=933s>

28.4. *Violence Against Women and the Feminist Strike*

- Adriana Cavarero, "The Crime of Medea", *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence*, New York 2009: Columbia University Press, pp. 25-28
- Veronica Gago, "Violence: Is there a War on and against Women's Bodies?", *Feminist International. How to Change Everything*, London/New York 2020: Verso, pp. 56-83
- Judith Butler, "The Ethics and Politics of Nonviolence", *The Force of Nonviolence*, London/New York 2020: Verso, pp. 103-150

Background

Eva von Redecker, "An upheaval that this form of strike not so much causes as consummates",

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6phDEXEdaw&feature=youtu.be>

5.5. *Vakantie*

12.5. *The Spectacle of Violence*

- Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Cambridge 2009: Harvard University Press, chapter 1, pp. 15-20
- Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection. Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford 2007: Oxford University Press, "Introduction", pp. 3-14

- Fred Moten, “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream”, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis 2003: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-24
- Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, in *Small Axe*, Number 26 (Volume 12, Number 2), June 2008, pp. 1-14

Background

Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, “The Black Outdoors”,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_tUZ6dybrc

19.5. *Abolishing State Violence*

- Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, New York 2003: Seven Stories, chs 1 & 6, pp. 9-21, 105-115
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence”, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism*, London/New York 2017: Verso, pp. 225-240
- Allegra M. McLeod, “Envisioning Abolition Democracy”, 132 *Harvard Law Review* (2019), pp. 1613-1649

Background

Robyn Maynard, “Abolish the Carceral State”,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7gQvF8TZrc&feature=youtu.be>

Resources

- Critique(s) of Violence series of events at UvA:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLx90mWm2uvv1DAQuQAd6Zdl1AS2Zd1QI>
- Youtube-Playlist on Abolitionism:
- https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLx90mWm2uvvl9BYFmykVPt4MmZp4Qsx_a
- Abolition Syllabi:
 - Prison Abolition Syllabus: <https://www.aaihs.org/prison-abolition-syllabus-2-0/>
 - Abolitionist Futures: <https://abolitionistfutures.com/full-reading-list>
 - Abolition Journal Study Group: <https://abolitionjournal.org/studyguide/>
 - Abolition Library: <https://www.thedigitalabolitionist.com/theabolitionistlibrary>