

# Strategically vague

## [ BOOK REVIEW ]

Bernstein, J (2013) **Violence: Thinking without banisters**. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
ISBN 978-0-7456-7064-5 pbk. Pages ix + 228

## Chris Desmond

Human and Social  
Development Programme,  
Human Sciences  
Research Council,  
Durban  
[cdesmond@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:cdesmond@hsrc.ac.za)

As an unidentified dyslexic in primary school I worked my way into the advanced reading group. When a school inspector arrived, conducted a series of tests and declared that I was some rather significant number of years behind in my reading age, my teachers expressed shock. I had fooled them by learning and applying two lessons: the blurb on the back of the book gives you a lot to talk about; and never be too specific, leave what you say open to almost any interpretation, that way you will never be exposed. In reviewing **Violence: Thinking without banisters**, I am left reflecting on these primary school years. Firstly about just how exposed I would be if I tried to use the blurb on the back of the book to bluff my way through a review (the book itself has little to do with the proposed summary on the back cover). Secondly, I missed my calling, I should have been a philosopher. Apparently if you leave everything you say unspecific and open to interpretation, people speak about you for years after your death – mainly because they are looking for themselves, or at least their ideas, in your non-specific writings.

The blurb on the back of the book, the blurb I read before agreeing to review the book, speaks of how “we live in a time when we are overwhelmed with talk and images of violence ... we can’t escape ... another murder, another killing spree ... Our age might well be called “The age of violence”. It goes on to say that because of this it is important to ask, “What do we mean by violence? What can violence achieve? Are there limits to violence and, if so, what are they?”. The blurb suggests that Richard Bernstein seeks to answer these questions by drawing on the work of five thinkers who have paid attention to violence: Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Jan Assmann.

I was left expecting a book which would draw on these five thinkers to shed light on current happenings. I was interested to see how Bernstein would pull this off. Knowing

a little of these thinkers' work (or rather a lot of some and none of others) I was curious how their work could be used to reflect on the individual experience of general violence – the experience of reports of violence or the depiction of violence in movies. I wondered how our current time could be thought of as the Age of Violence – I can think of a few ages more deserving of the title.

Contrary to the blurb, what I found was a detailed discussion of what each of the five figures wrote and what that implies about what they thought – and how much time can be spent figuring out what someone was thinking from what they were writing. First there is a separate discussion on each of the five authors, and then this is drawn together with the author's own reflections on the questions raised in regards to each of the five. The author's reflections are interesting, and insightful, but general, with little reference to current events. The book is a reflection on a body of literature – not an application of that body to the current time.

The book was not what I expected, but that in and of itself does not make it good or bad, it simply highlights the failings of the back cover (or the successes, but I shall return to that). The introduction, the five chapters, one on each of the figures, and the final chapter of the author's reflections make for a fascinating read, overall; although not all chapters were created equal.

The chapter on Carl Schmitt spends a great deal of time justifying the consideration of his views. Schmitt was an openly anti-Semitic Nazi supporter. To say that it is important to consider his writings in a reflection and critique of violence does, not surprisingly, require justification. However, the length of the justification detracts from what is otherwise a sensitive and insightful summary, both of his work, and its failings. Most interesting is Bernstein's discussion of how Schmitt relied on the very thing he ridiculed, a normative base.

The chapter on Walter Benjamin was, for me, the low point of the book. Of Benjamin's body of work, his work on violence is arguable not among his most useful contributions. Even Bernstein notes, in the concluding chapter, that Hannah Arendt, despite being Benjamin's friend, writing extensively on the topic and having a clear interest in his work, never mentions Benjamin's work on violence. Bernstein speculates that Arendt thought it a stumble. From Bernstein's discussions in the chapter focused on Benjamin it is clear that there are grounds for such speculation. Benjamin draws a distinction between mythical violence and divine violence, but explains the latter in cryptic terms. This lack of clarity has led to great number of highly varied interpretations. In summarizing a number of these differing interpretations Bernstein succeeds only in clarifying that Benjamin said very little, but the little he said provides ample opportunity for others to find support for their own ideas. From the numerous commentaries that have been written it appears people do like to find support for their own thinking in characters from the past, even if finding it requires a few leaps of faith and some mental gymnastics.

The analysis of Arendt and Fanon are the high points, both in the individual chapters and the concluding reflections. Bernstein highlights many misinterpretations of their work, particularly Fanon's. In his reflection he develops a wonderful conversation between the two – drawing out similarities that have been all too often missed. He dispels the simplistic interpretation of Fanon as a glorifier of violence, showing rather how his work was in fact a critique of violence. He shows how the ideas of Fanon and Arendt, far from being always at odds, often overlap. The book is worth the read if only for the chapters devoted to these two authors and Bernstein's exploration of the overlaps in their thoughts.

The final thinker covered is Jan Assmann, the only contemporary thinker included. His focus on religious violence, a topic of some interest in the current time, gives some hope of bringing the book cover to life. That hope is, however, unfounded. This modern thinker spends his time writing about past thinking or rather remembering.

The book ends with Bernstein's own reflections. After discussing how the authors relate to each other, he turns to his own thoughts, seeking to draw out what he sees as the lessons learned. He covers three points: "(1) The endurance and protean quality of violence; (2) the limits of violence; (3) nonviolence, violence, and politics". He ends off with the conclusion that public debate is needed, rather than solitary wrestling with the issues. If there is no debate, he argues, violence will all too often triumph.

The book is about political violence, violence on a large scale, violence between states or warring parties. I am interested in violence at the individual level. I am interested in how people understand violence – not philosophers, but everyday people, those who see violence, experience violence, commit violence. The back of the book suggested I would not be disappointed, and so was successful in getting me to select the book for review. But of the thinkers covered in the book the only one to come close to the issues I was interested in was Fanon. He talks of the effects of a violent system on people and how this alters their self-perception and can possibly lead them to act violently. He addresses sources of violence, not only at the macro level, but at the level of the perpetrator of the act itself. I wanted to read a book about what we could learn from such thinking; a book about what the effects of current systems are on people's understandings of violence, and on their propensity to be violent. Maybe I will find that somewhere else.