

## **Toward a Credible Pacifism: Violence and the Possibility of Politics**

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Dustin Ells Howes

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Dustin Ells Howes' book is challenging, as indicated by its title, and important and groundbreaking, as indicated by its subtitle. The challenge of his title arises out of his ambition not to preach to the choir but to the unchurched. He, therefore, attempts to ground a "credible pacifism" not in faith, but in political theory, ultimately, by means of an ethics of tapasya or suffering, "With the help of [Primo] Levi and Socrates, a credible pacifism can be sure of one thing: considering the suffering of others is an essential part of politics" (174).

The importance of Howes' subtitle arises out of his success in cutting through the clutter of political theory from Hobbes to Foucault via Arendt to articulate a clear multidimensional conception of human violence. Then, with a clear conception in hand, he is able address the question of power and, hence, to situate both human violence and nonviolence among the "possibilities of politics": "Pacifists assert that violence cannot achieve worthwhile goals. Almost everyone else [fascists, liberals, republicans, communists, pragmatists, postmodernists] asserts that it can and does. ... This book explores why violence works or does not work and argues that it is no more or less effective than any other political method" (3). In particular, Howes argues that human violence is no more effective than Gandhi's method of satyagraha, which Howes understands as grounded in Gandhi's ethics of tapas or self-suffering (125).

After an introductory chapter, Howes divides his project into three parts: "Physical Violence," "Intersubjective Violence," and "The Possibility of Politics." His argument, as can be seen, is that the possibility of politics (whether violent or nonviolent) depends upon making the connection between physical violence and intersubjective violence. For, without this connection, any conception of human violence is radically incomplete and unable to explain the relationship of political violence to political power.

The initial obstacle to making this connection is the fact that “the meaning of violence is remarkably unstable” (4). The reader encounters this instability in almost every chapter. To start with, Howes begins chapter 1 by capturing the simple potential for physical violence with Hobbes’ observation that our bodies are “able and fragile,” “vulnerable and capable” (15-16; 24). Then, building on Hobbes’ trope, he lists and explains seven human vulnerabilities favored by seven different theorists: “Marx’s alienated labor, Hegel’s slavery, Foucault’s discipline and punishment, Elaine Scarry’s torture, Sharon Maucus’s rape, Carl von Clausewitz’s war, and Sartre’s objectification” (4, cf. 123). If physical violence means all this and more, then the term is truly unstable. In chapter 2, Howes gives further examples of the term’s instability, but finally focuses in on Clausewitz, who, according to Howes, suggested that human “violence is the use of another’s body in order to submit or destroy their will for some purpose,” often a political purpose (41).

From Clausewitz’s conception, Howes draws two significant conclusions. The first is that the line between physical violence and nonviolence can be drawn with considerable confidence. When physical force and coercion to “another’s body” is not used “to submit or destroy” the other’s will, the action does not count as physical violence. When physical force and coercion to “another’s body” is used “to submit or destroy” the other’s will, the action does indeed count as physical violence. Second, and most crucially, harm to the body is not for the *purpose* of harming the other’s body; the purpose is to harm the other’s will, the other’s subjectivity. Hence, human physical violence is inevitably connected to intersubjective violence. “No plausible account of violence,” Howes concludes, “can refer only to the body; [human physical] violence entails something more than our being together [as “able and fragile” beings]” (51).

In Part II, “Intersubjective Violence,” Howes gives a complex and sophisticated explanation of this “something more.” However, his key insight derives from two incidents retold by Primo Levi in *Survival at Auschwitz*. Levi was an Italian Jew and a trained chemist. As such, three months after his arrival at Auschwitz, he was selected as a possible candidate for a job as a lab assistant in one of the factories attached to the Auschwitz camp. Working indoors in a physically untaxing job was a potentially life-saving opportunity. Before getting the job, however, he had to pass a “chemical examination” given by one of the three German chemists who worked in the lab. One day, Levi’s capo, Alex, ushered him into the “examination.” Dr. Pannwitz, the examiner, was writing when the two arrived. Levi, then,

had the strangest and most devastating experience of his incarceration:

When he finished writing, he raised his eyes and looked at me. From that time I have thought about Doctor Pannwitz many times and in many ways. ... That look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany. (56-7)

Immediately after this devastating “look,” while walking back to the lager, the same experienced was repeated when Alex soiled one of his hands on a greasy cable:

Without hatred and without sneering, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of his hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the poor brute Alex, if someone told him today, on the basis of this action, I judge him and Pannwitz and innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and elsewhere. (57)

Howes correctly sees how these two events, with their total lack of physical violence, embody the ultimate intersubjective violence. He notes that, “Levi’s experiences expose the potentially devastating effects of two rudimentary aspects of intersubjectivity: our inability to fully know one another and our freedom to comport ourselves as we may in the presence of others” (54). Looking “across the glass window of an aquarium,” Levi is dumbfounded by the consequences of his physical presence and his intersubjective absence. Taking the fullest advantage of their “inability to fully know” Levi, while simultaneously exercising to the fullest their “freedom to comport themselves as they may,” both Dr Pannwitz and Alex perpetrate the ultimate in intersubjective violence: the total disregard of everything but the obstinate physicality of Levi’s body.

Armed with Levi’s insight, Howes concludes, “A second kind of violence—intersubjective violence—is the root of physical violence” (73), because “with intersubjectivity comes the potential of utterly divergent and incompatible ways of being” (69). And, in such a world, “if life is unlivable unless others change, it might lead us to pursue change at all costs” (92).

In less abstract terms, the line between political violence and nonviolence can now be drawn with considerable confidence: When “our freedom to comport ourselves as we may”

is tempered by an effort to know others more fully, physical violence will not normally be used on the bodies of the others “in order to submit or destroy their will for some purpose.” When “our freedom to comport ourselves as we may” is exacerbated by little or no effort to know others more fully, physical violence will often be used on the bodies of the others “in order to submit or destroy their will for some purpose,” often a political purpose. In other words, paraphrasing John Dewey, “My actions become [intersubjective] ‘violence’ when they prevent others from being [or doing] as they may” (77). That is, “this violence of intersubjectivity is best expressed as *the experience of severely discordant dispositions*” (88). By extension, therefore, the “nonviolence” of intersubjectivity is best expressed as the experience of severely concordant dispositions.

But a clearer understanding of “concordant and discordant dispositions” does not, in itself, lead to a better understanding of the “possibilities of politics.” The relationship between human violence and power in politics still has to be thrashed out. For this task, Howes turns principally to Hannah Arendt and produces a stunning reanalysis of her work, which he, nonetheless, believes is flawed: “She underestimates the relationship between physical violence and power, but overestimates the effectiveness of physical violence as political action” (103). With allowances, Howes agrees with Arendt that, “If we collapse political action and violence, ... political action becomes meaningless” (103). This is the case because “The lifeblood of politics is power,” and not political violence, which is purely instrumental (105). To be sure, “Power can employ but cannot be made by violence in the way work makes a chair or a table” (108, cf. 117). Instead, “Power comes into existence when people speak and act together,” when they act in concert due to concordant dispositions (105).

To sum up and extend Arendt, the connection between sociopolitical power and human violence is stark: concordant dispositions produce both sociopolitical power and nonviolence because “people speak and act together”; discordant dispositions produce both sociopolitical violence and powerlessness because people do not speak and act together. At this point, Howes is in a position both to amend Arendt’s assertion that violence cannot make power and to conclude his analysis of the political utility of physical violence: “Physical violence can create power, but not any more reliably than speech or other non-physically violent deeds. To create power with physical violence, we remove certain people from the mix, not so much to ‘win hearts and minds,’ but to change the configuration of

intersubjectivity itself” (116).

With this, Howes has brilliantly achieved the promise of his subtitle. Against all expectations, he has stabilized the concept of human violence by establishing the causal link between its physical and intersubjective manifestations. Next, and perhaps more important, he has clarified the relationship between human “violence and the possibilities of politics” by clarifying the relationship between human violence and sociopolitical power. It is a stunning achievement.

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