

REVIEW

Johanna Oksala, *Foucault, Politics, and Violence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0818128033

In *Foucault, Politics and Violence*, Johanna Oksala provides a sophisticated intervention into feminist, political, and Foucauldian literatures addressing the relationship between the political and violence. Oksala lays out a post-structuralist inquiry into the relationship between violence and political ontology. Adopting Foucault's approach of "ontology of the present", Oksala aims to reveal that ontologies are not foundational of the political, but are themselves politicized realities contingent on historical and political struggles. Foucault's power/knowledge is used to "question the ontological necessity" (6) of violence and critically rethink the ontological commitments of political theories that regard violence as essential or instrumental to the political. Oksala troubles these commitments in contending that political reality cannot be assumed as given, but is constituted through interpretive struggles and historical practices of violence. It is therefore necessary to critically examine the ontological understanding of the nature of politics in order to critique practices of violence and the rationalities enabling them (5).

The primary object of Oksala's critique is political theories that hold violence and politics as irreducible. Her main claim "is to show that the connection between violence and the political is not internal or essential, but contingent: violence is not an ineliminable part of politics" (3). Oksala lists a number of other aims and objectives of the book, however these are ancillary to the argument that violence is not intrinsic to politics. Oksala makes this argument across nine chapters, which survey theoretical, historical and contemporary debates relating to violence in the political sphere. Although operating with a Foucauldian lens, Oksala provides evenhanded accounts of the key theories and theorists she is opposing, critiquing or appropriating to establish her argument. Oksala writes with clarity that successfully brings the ideas of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and René Girard into conversation with each other and contemporary theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben. In addition to a sophisticated review of the theorists, Oksala offers careful analyses of gendered violence, neoliberal violence, and Foucault's writings on Iran. However, Oksala's main contribution is her original argument on the ontological and historical relationship between violence and the political.

In arguing that violence can be eliminated from political order, Oksala critiques conceptions of the political that hold to essentialist ontologies of violence, while resisting the liberal social contract tradition that externalizes violence. It is between liberal and agonist politi-

cal theories that Oksala examines the relationship between violence and politics. While liberal theories base the political on a consensus that externalizes violence and leaves it in the state of nature, the agonist tradition relies on excessively broad or primordial conceptions of violence to make it intrinsic to the political. The problem with both approaches, according to Oksala, is that the former misunderstands the political, while the latter misunderstands violence. Oksala attempts to reconceive the relationship between violence and the political to argue that violence is not essential to the political, yet this does not entail that the political is a harmonious space of rational consensus (4).

Oksala critiques and appropriates aspects from both liberal and agonist political thought. In arguing against the liberal tradition that externalizes violence through rational consensus, Oksala adopts an agonist conception of politics as struggle and contestation. Yet in order to avoid the expansive (Žižek) or primordial (Schmitt) definitions of violence found among agonist theorists, Oksala holds to a liberal or traditional definition of violence as intentional bodily harm that is prima facie objectionable (9). Operating with this definition of violence, Oksala seeks avoid ontological notions of violence and the conflation of struggle, language, or power with violence. I address Oksala's unquestioned acceptance of this definition of violence below, however her stated interest lies not in definitions, but in the political rationalities that facilitate violence. It is Oksala's goal to expose these rationalities and thereby allow them to enter political debate (10).

In distinguishing her conception of agonism from theorists such as Schmitt or Mouffe, Oksala adopts a post-structuralist denial of all essentialist political ontologies (4). Unlike Mouffe, whom Oksala contends relies on a contradictory ontology of anti-essentialism and essentialism (52), Oksala wishes to provide a consistently anti-essentialist agonistic politics that "refuses to accept violence as a pre-given ontological constant" (52). Thus for Oksala, agonism is not defined by an essential violence inherent in human nature or social relations, but "from inevitably exclusionary and power-laden nature of the constitution of reality" (4). It is here that Oksala's acceptance of the traditional definition of violence as intended bodily harm does significant work for her argument. Oksala interprets Foucault as opposing violence and power in *Society Must Be Defended*, when he abandons war as the model for politics and adopts the agonistic and strategic notion of governmentality. Thus, society is agonistic, not because of inherent violence, but the contingency of historical practices of power violence that comprise ontologies of the present (47).

The contingency of social and political reality allows these realities to be constituted by competing interpretations and political struggles, but these interpretations and struggles are not equivalent to violence. According to Oksala, "we live in an agonistic society because the social sphere is a hegemonic field of contestable interpretations and values, and not because it is made up of violent individuals" (5). Contested interpretations and struggles certainly contribute to violent acts, but Oksala argues that theorists are too hasty in either drawing causal links or collapsing all interpretive and political struggles under the banner of violence. Oksala's agonism regards reality as constituted by political struggles. Rather than viewing political order as progressing-beyond (liberal) or repressing (agonist) primordial violence, Oksala argues that these political ontologies sustain and produce historical practices of violence that continue operate and constitute political reality in the present.

While the first three chapters lay the philosophical and theoretical groundwork, in Chapter 4 Oksala explores the relationship between violence, power, and the subject in the context of gendered violence. On Oksala's account, gendered violence cannot be explained through appeals to a natural aggression inherent to the male subject. The male subject, according to Oksala's Foucauldian analysis, is produced through historically contingent relations of power and practice of violence. Instead of focusing on an inherent male violence, Oksala argues that the political rationalities and ontologies that sustain the male domination of women and children require analysis. From this perspective, critiques of gendered violence need to sever the links between male subjectivity and practices of violence at the level of political ontology. That is, critique needs to let go of essentialist notions of subjectivity, gender, or violence and address the political rationalities sustaining and constituting practices of violence.

In Chapter 5, Oksala outlines the differing perspectives among Foucault, Arendt, and Agamben on the relationship between life and politics. A major theme in the growing biopolitical literature, particularly following Agamben, is the relationship between sovereign and biopolitical violence. Unlike the violence of the sovereign, which is murderous and bloody, biopolitical violence refrains from killing (101). According to Oksala, "biopolitical practices of violence are typically grounded in effective policy, professional management, and expert knowledge" (100). This makes biopolitical violence harder to detect than sovereign violence. However on Oksala's definition of violence, as intentional bodily harm, it is curious to suggest that biopolitical violence is more difficult to detect than sovereign. It is here that greater attention to definitional debates over violence would serve Oksala's thesis. For if violence is narrowly defined as physical harm, then presumably the violent effect of a sovereign or biopolitical regime would be equally visible on the bodies of the victims. Greater attention to definitions of violence and how they function is necessary. However, a charitable reading of Oksala's point is that the biopolitical rationality that enables practices of violence is harder to detect. This is particularly significant in critically analyzing practices of violence in the neoliberal context.

Across Chapters 6, 7 & 8 Oksala addresses the historical practices of violence in the modern state and their continued operation in neoliberal practices of government. In reading Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* as a history of violence, Oksala uses the notion of microphysics of power to articulate the technologies of violence operating in modern state institutions (106). Rather than solely relying on the executioner or the sword, a range of experts such as medical practitioners, scientists, and military advisors provide a rational basis for liberal-democracies to legitimately and rationally use violence to further the legitimacy of the state. Following Foucault, Oksala is hesitant to theorize the state and instead focuses on the strategies and rationalities of state violence. In discussing the strategies of resistance put forward by popular author Naomi Klein, Oksala emphasizes her argument that critique cannot focus on individuals, institutions, or even the State, but needs to focus on the political rationalities that justify violence against forms of life that threaten the wellbeing of the population.

The neoliberal rationality that seeks to maximize life is, according to Oksala, a depoliticizing violence that transforms political or moral struggles into competing economic interests. A violent riot under neoliberal logics is not a political act, but a losing strategy to gain the end

of recognition, a job, basic needs or whatever. Drawing on Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, Oksala articulates the way neoliberal political rationality understands and governs human behavior through cost-effective means to an end. The challenge in the social and economic matrix of neoliberal governmentality, according to Oksala, is to allow the space for some forms of human behavior to retain an irreducibly political and moral meaning (144). That is, the neoliberal claim to rational governance must be questioned to create the space for alternative means and ends to enter the political arena – justice, compassion, solidarity, or pleasure.

Again, it is in the context of disrupting the neoliberal claim to rational governance that Oksala's analysis would benefit from a detailed definition of violence. Oksala claims that the "disruptive forces of violence may appear as a genuine and sometimes appealing alternative to people disenchanted with the all-encompassing framework of cost-benefit analysis and the systemic, "rational" forms of violence compatible with it" (145). Oksala's analysis of the Paris riots in contrast to Žižek's, highlights the potential significance for disruptive violence. However, Oksala's earlier definition and unquestioned acceptance of violence as *prima facie* objectionable appears to preclude appeals to violence a positive force that disrupts neoliberal rationality.

The final chapter, "Terror and Spirituality", is the most speculative and fragmentary of the book. This is not a criticism, as the analysis is dealing with themes and texts rarely discussed in Foucauldian scholarship. Namely, Oksala reads Foucault's interest in the Iranian revolution as political spirituality that attempts 'to find new meanings in politics itself' (153). Drawing on Walter Benjamin's project of radically rethinking politics and interpreting Foucault's writings on Iran as an intervention into the political future of Europe (150), Oksala outlines political spirituality as messianic politics containing a possible interruption of all previous history, opening up an unrealized future, a world yet to come. On Oksala's reading of Foucault, revolt has the structure of a promise that points to a radically different future shaped by a spiritual political community. Sacrificial revolt, the inexplicable willingness of those in revolt to risk death, is not reducible to a means to some end, but disrupts the politics of means and ends. According Oksala, the event of sacrificial revolt is a spiritual practice that breaks into political history (155). This practice opens the possibility for political spirituality, not political violence, to become the definition of the political.

An initial, and perhaps obvious, criticism is that the conception of political spirituality is derived from a very limited section of Foucault's work. However, there are fragmentary sketches of the revolutionary life and the revolutionary figure in Foucault's recently published lectures *The Government of the Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*. Although Oksala does not discuss these texts, they could provide further support, but also disrupt Oksala's use of sacrificial revolt and political spirituality. These lectures were delivered a few years after Foucault's writings on Iran and demonstrate that Foucault's analysis of revolt included themes of the Christ, violent life, secret sociality, and bearing witness to truth and the truth of one's life.¹

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, trans. G. Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). pp. 183-89; Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, trans. Graham Burchell, Lectures at the Collège de France: 1982 - 1983 (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). p. 70.

These themes do not undermine Oksala's thesis of sacrificial revolt and political spirituality, however they do provide further complexities. Particularly if bearing witness to truth is rendered a means to the end of future politics as determined through secret sociality and political community.

Although Oksala claims that the notion of political spirituality does not entail God or religion, it is difficult to read the messianic tropes of new community and a world yet to come arising out of non-violent sacrifice without recalling the sacrifice of Jesus and the early Christian communities. The absence of an engagement with Christian theology and practice of sacrifice, particularly the figure of Jesus, is a weakness of Oksala's analysis of political spirituality. Foucault, and more recently Simon Critchley, paid close attention to the writings and practices of Christian communities to elaborate insights into political history and contemporary practices.² A similar engagement would serve to strengthen, what Oksala admits is a "tentative attempt in political imagination" (155).

Despite the lack of a critical analysis of traditional definitions of violence and a serious engagement with Christian and Islamic thought on politics and sacrifice, Oksala has provided a valuable contribution to Foucauldian scholarship and contemporary debates over the place of violence in political and social reality. In particular, her challenge to expansive definitions of violence and assumptions that violence is irreducible to the political are important interventions that will no doubt provoke further scholarship and debate.

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² Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (Verso, 2012). See also, Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (T&T Clark, 2011); Valerie Nicolet Anderson and Sophie Fuggle, eds., *Special Edition: Michel Foucault and St. Paul* (Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory, 2010).