

# Critique(s) of Violence

Syllabus

1<sup>st</sup> semester 2022/23, block 1

MA Political and Social Philosophy

*Room: PCH 3.01*

*ECTS: 6*

*Docent: dr. Daniel Loick*

*Email: [d.loick@uva.nl](mailto:d.loick@uva.nl)*

*Time: Wednesdays, 9-12 h*

*First session September 14<sup>th</sup>, last session October 19<sup>th</sup>*

## 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 and political activism 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 and discuss its political relevance today. We will also discuss some of the major contemporary approaches to a new critique of violence.

We will read, among others, Benjamin, Butler, Dorlin, Davis, Gago, Vergès, Walia, Moten, and Hartman.

## Recommended prior knowledge

General basic knowledge about critical theories (especially the Frankfurt School, feminist and anticolonial 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.

## 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 two times (it can be a question, comment, etc.). The assessment of Perusall is on a pass/fail basis.
- *Either:*
  - Contribute to *The Critique(s) of Violence Mixtape*. Each week (starting in week 2), send me a song that is related to that week's topic. In addition, upload a short essay (500-700 words) on canvas about that song and its topic. You should use one (or more) of the texts from the syllabus to describe, explain or elucidate the phenomenon that the song addresses. The texts can be essayistic in style but should be pointed and theoretically informed. [Example: in week 2, a fitting song would be M.I.A.'s "Borders", accompanied by a short text on the EU border regime]. I will comment on the texts, you can then revise them and submit them as a dossier (via email). The Mixtape will be put on Spotify and then be published together with selected texts on a blog.

*Or:*

- 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 mixtape portfolio and the paper is 31.10.2021 (send via email). The final grade of the class will be based solely on the mixtape / the paper.

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

## Format

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

You are 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.

## Corona Policy

All participants of the course are highly encouraged to wear masks in the classroom whenever they are not speaking. In addition, follow UvA's current corona safety measures (<https://www.uva.nl/en/current/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>)

## Class climate

Creating a respectful, inclusive and attentive atmosphere in the 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 about 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, we will try to work out a solution together.

Please contact me with any discomfort about the class climate.

## Program

### 14.9. *Toward a Critique of Violence*

- Walter Benjamin, "Toward the Critique of Violence", Critical Edition, edited by Julia Ng and Peter Fenves, Stanford 2021: Stanford University Press, pp. 39-61

#### *Background*

Daniel Loick, "Benjamin and Abolition",  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtU1xIdcmII>

### 21.9. *Violence and Borders*

- Harsha Walia, "Fortress Europe", *Border & Rule. Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, Chicago 2021: Haymarket, pp. 105-130

- Donatella Di Cesare, “Migrants and the State”, *Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration*, Cambridge 2020: Polity, pp. 5-77

*Background*

Vicki Squire, “Unruly Migrations”,

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

28.9. *Violence Against Women and the Feminist Strike*

- 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
- Francoise Vergès, “Neoliberal Violence”, *A Feminist Theory of Violence*, London 2022: Pluto, pp. 10-34

*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>

5.10. *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

*Background*

Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, “The Black Outdoors”,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_tUZ6dybrc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_tUZ6dybrc)

12.10. *Politics of Self-Defense / Politics of Non-Violence*

- Judith Butler, “The Ethics and Politics of Nonviolence”, *The Force of Nonviolence*, London/New York 2020: Verso, pp. 103-150
- Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense. A Philosophy of Violence*, London/New York 2022: Verso, chs 7 & 8 (book will be published in September 2022)

*Background*

Elsa Dorlin, “On Violence”,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmRegQLpi2o>

#### 19.10. *Abolishing State Violence*

- Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, New York 2003: Seven Stories, chs 1 & 6, pp. 9-21, 105-115
- 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=PLLx90mWm2uvvl9BYFmykVPt4MmZp4QSxa>
- 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>