

***A Feminist Theory of Violence* by Françoise Vergès. Translated by Melissa Thackway. London: Pluto Press, 2022.**

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In *A Feminist Theory of Violence*, Françoise Vergès examines several broad questions concerning feminist theorising about violence. She aims “to contribute to the reflection on violence as a structural element of patriarchy and capitalism, rather than specifically male” (4). Vergès proceeds by eschewing an analysis of “patriarchy through the female victim/male perpetrator prism” (4), instead proposing “a critique of dependency on the police and the judicialization of social issues—in other words, of the spontaneous recourse to the criminal justice system to protect so-called ‘vulnerable’ populations” (4). Vergès argues that the analysis of gender and sexual violence cannot be partitioned from an analysis of the neoliberal conditions that produce such violence: “acute inequality, wealth concentrated in the hands of the very few, the ever faster destruction of living conditions, and politics of murder and devastation” (15). To separate the situation of women from a global context where violence is naturalised is to perpetuate a divide that benefits patriarchy and capitalism. In such a scenario, the question becomes one of identifying and punishing “violent men”; of naturalising the actions of the few without dismantling the structures that generate abominable violence (15).

In this review, I highlight three key themes in Vergès’ theoretical focus and draw attention to some of the questions that arise from her approach. The first has to do with the embeddedness of violence in political economy and the unequal global order. This is arguably Vergès’ most important contribution in this book: she rightly draws attention to structural features of the contemporary political and economic order, including the commodification of life itself and the normalisation of multiple forms of

violence. Her argument is that violence against women cannot be treated in isolation from a recognition that there is a global state of violence as a result of neoliberalism, “hyperglobalisation and the exacerbation of its extractivist logics” (13). I agree with Vergès that simply addressing gendered violence in terms of violent *acts* without recognising its structural dimensions is insufficient, both intellectually and politically.

However, this raises the question: is it appropriate or necessary to maintain a binary that partitions gendered acts of violence from the broader conditions that structure violence in general? Feminists have conceptualised sexual and gender-based violence as “a continuum that spans interpersonal and structural violence” (e.g. Manjoo 2012, 27), which suggests that the binary is not necessary. Moreover, even if greater attention were to be paid to transforming political, economic and social inequalities, should women who have been the targets of gendered violence not still have recourse to a system of accountability for that harm? What is to be done about the egregious cases of gendered violence perpetrated by individual men or gangs of men? Does the State not have responsibility for prohibiting such violence? What would inaction by the State entail for patriarchal and capitalist impunity, whether within the State or society at large?

This brings us to the second key theme in Vergès’ theoretical focus, which is the State and its “politics of protection”. Vergès discusses the workings of the State in relation to violence and punishment. She argues that the State cannot be relied upon to protect women since it is inherently violent and only protects some women while treating others as disposable. Moreover, “[a]s the instance that regulates economic and political domination, the State condenses all forms of *imperialist*, patriarchal, and capitalist oppression and exploitation. The State as an institution is thus far from playing a small part in the organization and perpetuation of violence against women, poor, and racialized people” (3, emphasis added).

As a former colonial power, France has retained a virtually unparalleled degree of political, economic, military and cultural subordination and control over its former colonies (Pereira and Tsikata 2021), although this exertion of power is currently being weakened in the West African subregion. Whilst Vergès’ conception that the State condenses patriarchal and capitalist

oppression and exploitation applies to both the global North and South, the State in former colonies cannot be said to condense, in such a straightforward manner, all forms of imperialist power. It is true that some former colonies in the original BRICS¹ formation, such as Brazil and India, now operate as new imperial actors in Africa (Pereira 2024), but this is not a universal condition. Many African governments, unlike those in the global North, have economies dependent on primary commodities and are marked by complex and differentiated histories with differing relations to imperialism and colonialism (Pereira and Tsikata 2021). Given the resource-based conflicts and insurgencies of varying kinds in many African countries, what recourse to protection do beleaguered communities have other than the State? The existential conditions of refugees and stateless people are such that the power of the national State to effect more positive change in people's lives cannot be dismissed. While Vergès' point about the State's propensity to promote violence is critical, it is also the case that in countries of the global South, the State is required to be redistributive in principle, if not in practice. This points to the complexity of the question of gendered violence in relation to these co-existing, sharply contrasting dimensions of the State.

Vergès' analytical focus is on the structural conditions of violence in the metropole, with several examples based on the situation in France, Italy and the United States, and in some instances, France's 'Overseas Territories'. Consider the following statements: "While differences exist within all societies in their approaches to protection, it can be said that the patriarchal and capitalist State has reinforced these disparities, which have notably been racialized. In France, however, it is still very hard to study and publicly discuss the impact through the lens of race" (39). Vergès highlights the important fact of racism and racialisation in French political thought and the erasure of its impact on gendered violence during French colonialism. She goes on to state that the reason for recalling such facts is "because they belong to the history of State politics of protection, their racialization, and their sexism [...]" (46), that is, the racialisation and sexism of the State's "politics of protection". Although the forms of violence that Vergès subsequently discusses are global in coverage, the State that she analyses is that of colonial and post-colonial France. Vergès does not acknowledge the

specificity of her claims about the State, and therefore the limits of these claims, even as she generalises their implications for a “politics of protection”.

For example, Vergès refers to a “multiplication of measures, laws, and declarations concerning the protection of women and children alongside increased precarity, vulnerability, and violence against women and children” (33). While increasing precarity and violence characterise living conditions for most African people, there is no corresponding multiplication of laws and measures for the protection of women and children across the continent. In fact, there is considerable *resistance* to such measures in countries such as Nigeria, where it took 14 years for a coalition of committed activists to ensure that a law initially aimed at regulating violence against women was finally enacted as a law prohibiting violence against people in general, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015. Legislation prohibiting violence against *women* was cast as discriminatory, that is, as providing special protection to them, an indication of the opposition in the federal legislature to any law that supports the rights of women. Violence against women, girls and other members of marginalised groups is normalised and casually perpetrated with impunity by the State and other actors in Nigerian society. Ghana’s Domestic Violence Act was enacted in 2007 after a seven-year process described as “long and arduous, fraught with contestations over the place of domestic violence legislation in an African context” (Darkwah and Prah 2016, 6).

The third major feature of Vergès’ analytical focus is her emphasis on sharp differences among feminists in their orientation to violence, cast in binary and oppositional form: ‘carceral’ versus ‘anti-carceral’ feminists. “Based on notions of dangerousness and security, carceral feminism is an ideology that calls for courts to judge more severely and to hand down longer prison sentences, or for an increase in measures of surveillance and control” (62–63). As with her claims about the State, Vergès generalises cleavages in political orientations to violence among feminists. Feminists motivated by racialised, and racist, notions of dangerousness, risk and crime may indeed be pushing for such stern measures in France and elsewhere in the global North. But does that necessarily apply across the world?

In several African contexts, during the 1990s and 2000s, advocacy and mobilisation around the enactment of laws prohibiting gendered violence were carried out primarily by activists who engaged the State on the basis of gendered understandings of democracy. This was the case whether in the aftermath of anti-colonial struggles, as in South Africa, or military rule, as in Nigeria. Underlying such efforts is the political principle that the State, particularly in a democracy and in the wake of authoritarian and repressive rule, should be held responsible for shaping polities and societies free from gendered discrimination and violence. This more recent phase of African women's legal activism forms part of a long trajectory of feminist organising, for example, by Women in Law and Development in Africa and Women and Law in Southern Africa. Such legal activism has continually sought to shape post-independence States in ways that acknowledge the citizenship status of African women and hold the State accountable for its actions and inactions.

The case against carceral feminism is made most forcefully in the United States (Davis et al. 2022), where key features of incarceration include the racist targeting of African American men and other people of colour, and the tremendous increase in the numbers of incarcerated people in private for-profit prisons over the last five decades or so. Between 1970 and 2009, the number of people in state and federal prisons alone increased from 196,429 people to 1.6 million, amounting to 722% (Cheung 2004, cited in Justice Policy Institute 2011). The number of inmates in private prisons surged more than 2,000% between 1987 and 1996 (Sarabi and Bender 2000). Private prisons profit considerably from the exploitation of prison labour; prison lobbyists support political party campaigns as well as play a major role in shaping public policy on incarceration (Justice Policy Institute 2011). While public prisons have similar problems to those found in private prisons, such as violence, abuse, and a lack of services, the evidence suggests that these problems are worse in private prisons. Moreover, public prisons do not entail the conflicts of interest on multiple grounds that are generated by the prominence of private prisons and prison lobbyists (Justice Policy Institute 2011). In Africa, only South Africa currently operates private prisons, although Kenya is planning to do so (Perkins 2018). The spectre of private prisons in Africa, as structured in the United States context, is clearly one to

avoid and draws particular attention to the enduring question of how justice should be pursued in the wake of gendered violence.

A Feminist Theory of Violence provides much food for thought on how we understand violence, what can be done about it, by which entities, with what consequences, and the implications for feminist theorising and strategising. In the process, the book raises epistemological and political questions about the character of knowledge claims and their limits in this field. By depicting the State in localised terms whilst generalising its applicability, Vergès does not recognise the plurality of state formations and their inherent contradictions. She assumes the normative position that feminist relations with the State should be characterised by exit. Contrary to this, the historical and contemporary reality of sustained African feminist engagement with post-independence States points to the strategic question of *how* to carry out anti-violence activisms that address State accountability. Whilst Vergès' emphasis on the structural character of violence and its embeddedness in the unequal global order is more than timely, what is missing is a recognition of the role that feminists in France, for example, could be playing in holding their State accountable for its culpability in the violence that results from neoliberalism and the unequal global order.

Notes

1. BRICS is a regional grouping of emerging powers originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Initially a grouping of countries going through rapid economic growth, BRICS is now a formal intergovernmental organisation that "aims to create greater economic and geopolitical integration and co-ordination among member states". Since its formation, BRICS has expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

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