

# A Call to Arms

*by Fanny Bugnon*

---

**When groups defined as minorities take a political stand, those in a dominant position often see it as a threat. In a genealogy of power viewed through the prism of resistance, Elsa Dorlin analyses the political self-defence traditions these groups employ.**

---

Reviewed: Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre. Une philosophie de la violence*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017, 252 p., 18 €.

Citoyennes, although we have gained victories (...), we are nevertheless, still, and always, in danger (...). To arms; Nature, as well as the law, gives us the right to arm. Let us show men that we are not inferior to them either in virtue or in courage. (...). We will arm because it is reasonable that we should prepare to defend our rights, our hearths and our homes.<sup>1</sup>

These words (some of which are quoted on p. 49) were pronounced by Théroigne de Méricourt, on 25 March 1792, at the *Société fraternelle des Minimes* in Paris. A strong defender of the Revolution, which she intended to fight for, and of equality between the sexes, she was known as ‘the beautiful lady from Liège’—as she was of Belgian origin. She linked the political status of women with the right to bear arms over a year before the decree of the Convention of 30 April 1793 excluded women—except camp followers and washerwomen—from the army and, six months later, from political clubs. Hence, for the next 150 years, French women were relegated to a state of passive citizenship clearly differentiated, due to their gender, from that of men, consecrated by the figure of the citizen soldier.

In *Se défendre. Une philosophie de la violence*, Elsa Dorlin, a professor of political and social philosophy at Paris 8 university, questions the power relationships at work in the creation of second level citizenships in Europe, North America and the Middle East, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> *A Woman of the Revolution*, Théroigne de Méricourt (1911). Translated by Frank Hamel. Brentano’s Great Britain.

protests against this status since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Constructed on the basis of biopolitical criteria of race, gender or culture, these relegated identities force us to reconsider the contemporary definition of the political subject and the elaboration of a social contract based on domination and exclusion.

In eight chapters and a prologue, this essay develops an original perspective. It uses the criteria of ‘muscle power rather than the law’ (p. 15) to analyse the capacity for action of subaltern subjectivities. In other words, it updates the political self-defence traditions used by groups defined as minorities and/or inferior, and whose political affirmation is perceived as a threat by those—generally men—who hold dominant positions.

## **Fronts of Resistance**

Unlike legally defined legitimate defence, self-defence has no pre-existing object, but is defined as a form of resistance to experienced violence. It is part of what Elsa Dorlin defines as ‘one’s own martial ethics’ (p. 15). Developed over more than four centuries, these practices embody the ability of subalterns to affirm themselves as subjects with the right to defend themselves, to control the strength and power entities have over them, and to contest the control they are subjected to. Violence, both defensive and reactive, thus appears not as an end in itself, but as a means of resisting oppression and its deadly manifestations that give rise to a ‘memory of struggles’ that inscribes itself in the ‘body of the dominated (men and women)’, at a fundamental level. (p. 16). Elsa Dorlin hence invites us to dive into the ‘constellated history of self-defence’ (ibid.), a history made up of echoes and mises en abyme, despite the silence classically at work when it come to the access the dominated have to the power of violence. They are generally denied both their right and ability to defend themselves, and are disqualified from the political dimension of self-defence.

On the side of the dominated (both men and women) the first obstacle is to overcome a fundamental threshold, the inherited and codified threshold of the taboo of violence. From this perspective, ‘The Manufacturing of Disarmed Bodies’ (Chapter 1) retraces the broad outlines of the development of the monopoly of legal violence by the State; regarding its exercise as well as its tools and the sale of them. The dynamics of imperialist and colonialist governance at work, thus constructs hierarchised and fixed social positions while blocking the most basic forms of protest. This is clearly embodied in the Black Code of 1685 that prohibited slaves from carrying any kind of weapon. Elsa Dorlin continues her exploration of self-defence, by developing the question of the right to bear arms and its varied interpretations through the dichotomous notions of self-defence/defence of the nation (Chapter 2). The Anglo-American model, that distorted one of Henry II of England’s edicts of 1811 to force male subjects to arm themselves to defend the kingdom if necessary, is in contradiction with the French model of armed citizenship that makes the defence of the

homeland the *sine qua non* condition of the quality of citizen. This view was strongly criticised by Théroigne de Méricourt, cited above. In both cases, the terms of the established social contract justify the exclusion of social groups from citizenship, particularly on the basis of their sex or race.

The sexual and racial division of tasks thus promotes a ‘social management of martiality’ (p. 45) but this is only a *continuum*, something the British suffragettes who belonged to the Women’s Social and Political Union at the beginning of the 20th century, had well understood. Defining the contours of ‘feminist direct action’ (p. 58), their political aims and activist strategies were thus considered illegal, particularly their study of martial arts to physically confront male and police power. Attacking the representatives of power, or defending themselves against oppression, implied being ready to indulge in hand-to-hand combat, an attitude that can be seen as belonging to the field of thanato ethics, ‘practices that approach death as a time to reaffirm the value of life’ (p. 68). This is particularly well illustrated in the implementation of the exemplary and testamentary ‘live free or die’ principle during the insurrection in the Warsaw ghetto (Chapter 3). Elsa Dorlin in fact underscores the continuity of this approach in *krav maga*, promoted by the Israeli authorities in the name of the individual’s responsibility to defend himself.

## **Taking Justice Into One’s Own Hands**

Defining self-defence as ‘negative heroism related to fatalism, but revelatory of the ardent desire that a ‘we’ should survive the horror, nothingness and the obscene indifference of the world’ (p. 69), the analysis goes on to draw upon Hobbes’ and Locke’s philosophies of self-defence and the ‘inalienable right of self-defence’ (Chapter 4). The fabrication of the legitimate right citizens have to enforce justice themselves by resorting to violence, is thus read in the light of the genealogy of the Liberal State and various readings of the right to self-defence developed in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is particularly evident in the armed, paramilitary and extralegal version of this genealogy, which constitutes vigilantism. Favouring a vigilante model of citizenship, this view is hence used to serve conservative and racist interests that make violence – including lethal violence- not only a legitimate, but a necessary, means of maintaining a racialized social order (Chapter 5).

By inviting us to shift our gaze from the legality of violence to the question of its legitimacy, Elsa Dorlin takes her argument further by analysing how, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States ‘*legitimate* armed self-defence’ comes to be used in opposition to the ‘*illegitimate* violence of racism’ (p. 119). Indeed, the motto ‘*Self-defence: power to the people*’ (Chapter 6) brings the Afro-American organisations and the White supremacists into conflict. Against lynching and humiliations ‘Negroes all over the world must now organise to inflict a Waterloo upon their oppressors (...) The best thing the Negroes in every country can

do is to prepare to respond to fire with fire, a fire from hell' wrote Marcus Garvey in 1919, in his pan-African newspaper *The Negro World* (quoted p. 119-120). Garvey was a Jamaican figurehead of the Black cause and of pan-Africanism, settled in the United States. His approach leads to a confrontation between two viewpoints: the teleological view of non-violent resistance, that in its laborious exemplarity reveals the violence of the oppressor, and the agonistic strategy that chooses violence as the only way forward. By the impact it can provoke, violence becomes the means of creating a power relationship and profoundly shifting the lines, in other words it can lead to a counter-offensive, where self-defence becomes the very 'philosophy of the struggle itself' (p. 132).

## **The Rationales and Misfortunes of Emancipation**

Reducing the struggle to this martial perspective provoked strong criticism within the Afro-American organizations, due to the virilist and heterosexist nature of this approach. In addition, some adversaries of the *Black Panther Party* (BPP, originally *Black Panther Party for Self-Defense*) made use of this to reduce the BPP to its promotion of self-defence, and to silence the political analyses of the racist and sexist workings of capitalism—based on a racial and sexual division of work and a criminalisation of minorities. It also denigrated the social programmes implemented by the *Blacks Panthers*. Elaine Brown, a historic activist and President of the movement from 1974 to 1977, admits that the 'virilist semiology [constituted] a first tool to create awareness [to] give men and women who had been victims of violence the power to resist'. But later, along with other Afro-American feminists she denounces the drift towards virilism and heterosexism that reproduced 'one of the pillars of the imperial capitalist system' (p. 135), to the extent that it turned self-defence into a dead end.

Elsa Dorlin does not occult the internal criticism of the revolutionary movements and refuses the classical hierarchisation of struggles that tends to reduce the emancipation of women and sexual minorities to secondary issues. She nonetheless underscores the fundamental contribution of self-defence, as it was developed by the *Black Panthers*, to the ability of oppressed minorities to organise themselves, to ensure their own security (Chapter 7). Self-defence thus consciously becomes a collective space of resistance to violence, allowing for a 'shared safe space' (p. 147) that protects the vital forces against the violence present even within activist spaces, and against the emotional, moral and political exhaustion that the internal management of violence necessarily provokes, even leading to the creation of 'monstrous' and self-regulated 'travesties' of justice (p. 147). The risks of these deviations are reinforced by injunctions of loyalty towards the group that can provoke a sort of 'bioactivism' (p. 150), a militant equivalent of biopolitics, although this is rejected as the very essence of relationships of dominance that allows neither for a separation of powers, nor of regulatory spaces. In the face of all these threats, empowerment emerges as a redeeming view to combat

deviations that can become cannibalistic and consume the very struggles they are promoting. Empowerment is capable 'of producing a powerful subjectivity against victimist representations', by situating personal security as a means of surpassing the 'unresolved tension (...) [of] exclusion from vigilantism and revenge outside the sphere of the political' (p. 154).

Elsa Dorlin hence encourages a 'response' (Chapter 8) from an invigorating feminist perspective that rejects the fear that leads to paralysis and reduces the autonomy of women, including in their relationship to space. Based on Helen Zahavi's novel, *Dirty Week-end*, that shocked the world when it appeared in 1991, she connects freedom and security in the character of Bella, who one day refuses the 'phenomenology of the prey' (p. 163) that was prescribed for her as a woman. She decides to give free reign to her anger against everyday male oppression, going as far as employing violence. Refusing to continue to live a 'life on the defensive' (p. 181), and to consider violence solely as a tool in the hands of the dominant, Bella, 'born free and chained everywhere' intends to take justice into her own hands. Ten years later, we find the same schema in *Fuck Woman* (2001) by Warwick Collins, who attacks sexual predators 'to make them suffer for a while'. And to obtain *justice for herself*, she follows two principles: feminism, which for women consists in focusing their struggle on themselves and 'the best defence is attack'.

We well know that history is a battlefield that stretches far beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> century analysed by Enzo Traverso<sup>2</sup> (2010). *Se défendre* suggests an eminently political reading of relationships to violence, viewed as an existential issue between the dominant and the dominated (men and women) on either side of the Atlantic, particularly from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Pursuing the intersectional viewpoint already mobilised in *La Matrice de la race* (2006) where she studied the sexual and colonial genealogy of the French Nation, here Elsa Dorlin offers us an essay dedicated to resistance to forms of domination and their brutality. Unflinchingly adopting a clear standpoint, one of the novelties of her subject is to embrace a wide panorama of the fabrication of the dominated as political subjects, while the existing bibliography essentially focuses on a detailed analysis of the experiences of certain social groups.<sup>3</sup> We nonetheless regret the *stricto sensu* absence of a bibliography, as the references are only cited in the endnotes. The vast thematic chronological and spatial scale of the work can automatically constitute a weakness: by drawing upon heterogeneous sources without always nuancing and historically situating their impact, *Se défendre* juggles between a range of registers that are sometimes historical, sometimes philosophical or fictional, and at times it is difficult to really consider them together. Nonetheless, Elsa Dorlin puts forward an original and stimulating analysis of the resistance to domination and its ability to produce, not without

---

<sup>2</sup> Enzo Traverso, *L'histoire comme champ de bataille. Interpréter les violences du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> To only mention one: Coline Cardi and Geneviève Pruvost (Eds.), *Penser la violence des femmes*, Paris, La Découverte, 2012.

a certain conflict, as Michael Pollack<sup>4</sup> noted, political identities determined both by the lived experience of domination and the refusal to resign oneself to it.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, April 16, 2018.

Translated from French by Renuka George with the support of the Florence Gould  
Foundation.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, October 8, 2018.

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael Pollack, *Une identité blessée. Études de sociologie et d'histoire*, Paris, Éditions Métailié, 1993.