Butler’s phenomenological *re*-turn: Performativity, precarity and the politics of the political

Associate Professor Mary Walsh
Faculty of Government, Business and Law &
Research Fellow IGPA
Introduction

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Butler’s phenomenological re-turn: Performativity, precarity and the politics of the political

- A question often posed to Butler is how she moves from a theory of gender performativity to a concern with precarious lives?
- Butler’s earlier well known work is concerned with queer theory and the rights of sexual and gender minorities. Her more recent work marks a shift, as now she is interested, more generally, in how certain social conditions, or war, create populations that are ungrievable.
- Her current focus is upon how alliances form between populations and groups deemed disposable and how precarity operates as a mediating term as the basis of alliance between groups who may not have much in common.
- For Butler, “precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death” (2015: 33).
- One constant over her body of work is that identity politics has failed to provide an understanding of what it means, politically, to live together across differences often in circumstances of unchosen proximity (2015: 27).
- Butler combines the theoretical frameworks of performativity and precarity to consider how the right to appear provides a basis for a coalitional framework. This provides different ways of thinking about ethics, politics and critical theory more generally.
- It also provides an opportunity to consider the differential insights of critical and political theory respectively and the political difference this makes to assessments of contemporary times.
How this work came about

• Last year in mid-November 2015, I was approached by the USA political theory journal – *The Review of Politics*, to review Butler’s latest work (at that time) titled – *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press)
• The review will be published in *The Review of Politics, (2017)* Vol. 79, No. 1.
• Previously, I had published on Butler’s work in the context of sexual difference debates, specifically what was politically at stake for feminist politics regarding the question of what a politics without the subject would look like?
• At this time, I was interested in the sex/gender distinction and the different political articulations of feminist politics advocated between Australian feminist philosophers Moira Gatens and Liz Grosz and the American feminist theorist Judith Butler -
  • “How could deconstruction and feminism negotiate between competing political claims within such a framework? Would this turn into a politics of anything goes?” (Elam, 1994: 81)
• What does a feminist politics look like without the subject?
• Is it possible? And what is at stake politically between the various positions? Why does it matter?
What did I say then?: Ontology against performativity

- Butler’s *Gender Trouble* alludes to an extremely important point in the context of many contemporary feminists political concerns with ontology and performativity. Butler’s point that trouble is inevitable and the task is how to make the best of it can be used as a point of enquiry into the current status of what is politically at stake by framing the contestations in contemporary feminist critical practice around either either position.
- After all, Butler is not suggesting that the subject be done away with and this is precisely why feminist political theorists need to look closely at what constitutes the performativity challenge to ontology.
- Ontological understandings of the subject need not be limited to ontology as essence because contemporary feminist political theorists can also utilise an understanding of ontology as becoming, an understanding of ontology that is significantly elided because of the contemporary tendency to view all ontological positions as suspiciously essentialist.
What did I say then?:
Ontology against performativity

• In recent years much feminist philosophical, political and social theory has been largely preoccupied with questions that pertain to issues surrounding epistemological/ethical concerns. This has largely been at the expense of any arguments from ontology which have been prematurely dismissed for committing theoretical faux-pas that cluster under the rubric of various forms of essentialism.

• However, ontological arguments are not necessarily always essentialist and the association of essentialism and ontology are based upon widely held misconceptions of exactly what is at issue in rethinking identity and difference.

• The two positions outlined of ontology and performativity are based upon the work of Grosz/Gatens and Butler respectively. The ontological position is understood as a form of *Replying Elsewhere* whilst the performativity position is understood as a form of *Speaking Otherwise Within*.

• I acknowledge that bodies matter and argue that the question of *which* bodies matter should be central to the feminist theorising agenda if the issue of women’s continuing subordination is to be effectively theorised.
What did I say then?: Butler, difference and bodily subjectivity

• Butler’s work is having an enormous political impact upon contemporary feminist understandings of bodily subjectivity. In the past decade or so, her gender performativity position has been used to castigate feminists of sexual difference for their supposed ontological naivety (Walsh, 1998).

• What does this denigration and denial of sexual difference mean?
• What is at stake in discussing it and what purpose does it serve?
• Is it possible to recuperate sexual difference?

• This work responded to an article by Hughes and Witz (1997) ‘Feminism and the Matter of Bodies: From de Beauvoir to Butler,’ *Body and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 47-60.
What did I say then?: Butler, difference and bodily subjectivity

• Hughes and Witz (1997) examined the sex/gender distinction and its relationship to a fundamental third term the body. They argue (among other things) that whereas de Beauvoir privileges gender and elides the body, Butler privileges the body at the expense of gender. Moreover, they argue that Butler’s work is contributing to the general erosion and ‘disappearance’ of gender as a category of analysis because she allows the body to ‘represent more than mere residual facticity’ (47, 57).

• My reading of Butler suggests that, in fact, she does the reverse; that is, Butler privileges gender by incorporating an understanding of the body that significantly increases what the category of gender has previously been understood to mean.

What did I say then?:
Butler, difference and bodily subjectivity

- One of the most startling aspects of the Hughes and Witz (1997) article is their claim that Butler makes gender disappear behind the term sex. In many ways, Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (1993) is an explicit attempt to challenge the idea that sex is a natural or foundational bedrock that is simply overlaid with gender. Her interrogation of the category sex seeks to challenge the idea that sex is somehow more real than gender.

- Again, Butler insists she is not doing away with the subject. One can ask what sort of subject are we talking about here and what sorts of political investments comprise competing understandings of the subject?

- Butler is influenced by Foucault’s understanding of the subject which suggests that bodies of knowledge produce sexually and socially differentiated subjects. This is an anti-humanist position that contrasts with a humanist position that Butler completely rejects.

- By shifting her attention to the materiality of sex, Butler is expanding the category of gender to include an understanding of how cultural norms constitute the very materiality of sex. This is not the same thing as making the category of gender disappear behind the category of sex, and the category of sex is not to be equated with sexual difference in any straightforward way.
What did I say then?: Butler, difference and bodily subjectivity

- Butler’s post-structuralist critique of the subject is concerned with the body and subjectivity. As Rothfield point out, both phenomenologists (humanists) and poststructuralists (anti-humanists) have different understandings of bodily subjectivity.

- Phenomenology recognises the importance of body experience and is concerned with the lived experience of how our bodies and selves feels. Post-structuralism understands corporeality in a different way by suggesting bodies of knowledge constitute and produce sexually and socially constituted subjects (1994: 21).

- Rothfield is “tempted to say that phenomenology is more concerned with the inside of corporeality and post-structuralism with its outside, this would not be entirely true, for post-structuralism is concerned with both the inside and the outside of the bodily subject. The inside of corporeality is created, according to poststructuralists, as an inside. There is no true, pure inside, only surfaces, which, when inscribed, may exhibit and internal character’ (32-33).

- She reads this tension as a version of the agency/structure debate, which helps to understand Butler’s approach as taking into account corporeality without recourse to agency or the givenness of subjectivity.
Where did I say it?

• Walsh, M. (1994) 'Sexual Indifference & Political Theory,' _Social Alternatives_, 12, no.4, January, pp.29-31


Judith Butler

• Well known for her work in *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004)

• The publication of *Precarious Lives after September 11/2001* marks a shift in her work more generally
• Key texts published before and since then of relevance to this shift include:


Key terms

• Phenomenology – emphasis is embodiment, perception and bodily experience. How we experience ourselves and the world, how bodily experience is constituted, how we feel as opposed to conscious reasoning.

• Post-structuralism – does not appeal to the givenness of subjectivity to explain corporeal existence. Knowledge doesn’t mirror reality, it produces it. Relates to the production of socially and sexually differentiated subjects.

• Performativity – what one does, not what one is - “is about a differential and differentiating process of materializing and mattering, which remains uninsured and unanticipated, persistently and interminably susceptible to the spectral forces of events” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 140).

• Precarity – “In designating the politically induced condition in which certain people and groups become differentially exposed to injury, violence, poverty, indebtedness, and death, ‘precarity’ describes exactly the lives of those whose ‘proper place is non-being’ – relates to socially assigned disposability” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 19).
Butler, the Troubling of Politics and the Political (Walsh, 2010)

- In 2008, two key books appear that begin to situate Butler’s theoretical contributions specifically in relation to the discipline of political theory with a key focus upon politics and the political


- This book is an attempt to understand the ways Butler gets herself and her readers into trouble, as well as examining the ways she has made trouble and what effects her troubling has had on politics and the political more generally.
- By bringing Butler into perspective as a political thinker, the authors hope ‘to bring to light her political theory, as a politics of troubling and a troubling of politics’. In short, they seek ‘to introduce Butler as a troublemaker’ (p. 2).
- A key point of this book, is that the almost exclusive focus on *Gender Trouble* when considering Butler means that her broader contributions to political theory remain obscured. They suggest that it is liberals who should be really troubled by Butler, as they have confined *Gender Trouble* as a text about feminism and feminist issues ‘as if such issues were unrelated to liberalism as such – or as a distant landmark in some ‘emerging field’ of queer theory that is not yet on the radar’ (pp. 158-9).
- Overall, they claim that commentary on Butler is ‘guarded and grudging’ and ask why we would celebrate someone who makes trouble? On the whole, they consider that the trouble Butler makes isn’t appreciated and often treated with ‘faint praise’ (p. 158).

- This book marks the first collective critical encounters between political theorists and the work of Judith Butler. The encounter bridges the traditional terrain of political theory (sovereignty, rights, capitalism, culture) and philosophical enquiries that political theory engages in (epistemology, feminisms, ethics, phenomenology).
- Butler brings her terms to the encounters (vulnerability, grieving, ‘trouble’, the liveable life and performativity)
- They argue that Butler’s writings have made a significant impact upon political theory in the last 20 years. Overall, the various contributions go some way towards recognising and establishing Butler’s political theory, whilst acknowledging that Butler’s work is profoundly philosophical; and multi-disciplinary.
- ‘This collection is thus not *about Butler* but rather how political theorists *use* her work to do things* with her concepts, her claims, her theories’ (p. 2).
Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics
(Lloyd: 2007)

• Provides an original and engaging overview of Butler’s work including *Precarious Lives*, *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*.
•Whilst Butler’s work has impacted on many disciplines, Lloyd’s work is specifically interested on the impact upon political theory.
• Butler’s work on performativity have led some to question whether Butler has a politics at all. As an anti-humanist, Butler rejects the idea of an autonomous self that stands back from situations and decides to act.
• This doesn’t mean that Butler denies agency is possible, as Butler ultimately reconceptualises agency.
• For Butler, agency is not related to a theory of the self but is an effect of the operations of power/discourse and a phenomenon that cannot be separate from context.
• “Her politics is an imminent politics of subversion” (p. 76)
• Butler’s real strength emerging in her later work is the question of ‘liveability’ and what she calls “a politics of human life” (p. 136)
• Butler’s ethics are embedded in her account of politics as power relations that are involved in producing the human.
• The real strength of Butler’s entire work is her emphasis on norms.
Dispossession: The performative in the political

- Conversations with Athena Athanasiou (2013)
- Began talking about politics, theory, embodiment and how these relate to new formations of left politics with an initial concern with how older left politics may respond to contemporary feminist and queer concerns with resisting precarity.
- Athanasiou had recently addressed the bodily dimensions of the Greek debt crisis and the indefinite state of exception created by neoliberal governmental rationalities in the language of “economic emergency” and the manner in which forces of radicalisation and feminization fundamentally structure the condition of “becoming precarious” (viii).
- Athanasiou’s current work focusses upon forms of queer deconstruction and feminist performative politics and includes examining non-violent public demonstrations of grieving and resistance to contemporary regimes of biopolitics (regulation of the social body).
Dispossession:
The performative in the political

• Both Butler and Athanasiou share a post-structuralist starting point – that the idea of the unitary subject conveys forms of power that must be challenged and undone, as it signifies a type of masculinism that erases sexual difference and enacts mastery over the domain of life (ix).

• They started to think together about how they could formulate a theory of political performativity that could take into account a version of dispossession they wanted to articulate against a version they opposed.

• They sought in convergent ways to prepare Hannah Arendt “for a Left she would never have joined”, and examined questions of affect and ethics via frames of politics by thinking through contemporary forms of political mobilizations.

• The central question that pre-occupied both thinkers is – “What makes political responsiveness possible?” (xi)
Dispossession:
The performative in the political

• Being effected by what one sees, feels and comes to know is an experience of being “transported elsewhere” into other scenes and social worlds where one is not the centre.

• This dispossession can constitute forms of responsiveness that create action and resistances, in appearing together with others to challenge injustices. These include the systematic dispossession of peoples via forced migration, unemployment, homelessness, occupation, and conquest.

• Their key concern is taking up the question of how to become dispossessed of the sovereign self and gain entry into forms of collectivity that oppose forms of dispossession that systematically disrupt populations from modes of collective belonging and injustice.
The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler (Schippers, 2014)

- Draws upon Butler’s post 9/11 texts and reads her as an international theorist and global public intellectual, “whose ideas and writings make a significant contribution to (international) political philosophy and to public political discourse, and who has much to offer to the critical analysis of our global constellation” (p. 6).

- Asks three key questions:
  1. How can the scholarly attention appropriate Butler as a political philosopher?
  2. Specifically, what do Butler’s responses to the challenges of global interdependence contribute to the emerging field of international political theory?
  3. How do Butler’s political-philosophical reflections inform her interventions into post-9/11 public political discourse?
Notes towards a performative theory of Assembly

• Originates from the 2010 Mary Flexner Lectures of Bryn Mawr College. Butler focuses on the growing attention afforded to the form and effects of public assemblies and demonstrations, particularly their political potential.

• Butler does not engage with central concerns in democratic theory, but is conscious that debates about popular demonstrations tend to be understood as either governed by fear of chaos or radical hope for the future, or a combination of both. She marks these tensions to underscore from the beginning the disjunction between the political form of democracy and the principle of popular sovereignty, as they are not the same thing (p. 2).

• Crucially, an important argument in thinking about transient and critical gatherings is that bodies assembling matter. “Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make” (p. 8).
Notes towards a performative theory of Assembly

• Significantly, Butler is interested in the overlap between forms of linguistic performativity and forms of bodily performativity. “The specific thesis of this book is that acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political” (p. 9).

• In what may be referred to as Butler’s ongoing phenomenological turn, she wants to claim that when bodies assemble in public spaces (including virtual ones) they assert a plural and performative right to appear, one that situates the body in the centre of the political field.

• This encapsulates a bodily demand for a more liveable life (one of Butler’s central concerns in her published work for over a decade) in an era of increased austerity and precariousness. Politically, Butler situates these concerns in the increasing dominance of neo-liberal market rationality where many populations are denied the right to a liveable life.

• She cites a meeting of the Tea Party in the United States, where Congressman Ron Paul suggested that those who cannot pay for health insurance or choose not to be left to die. His assertion was greeted with shouts of joy. For Butler, something has been going wrong for a long time. Paradoxically, neo-liberal market rationality demands self sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time as it undermines public forms of support for individuals to live a liveable life.
Notes towards a performative theory of Assembly

- More generally, Butler engages with the work of Arendt and Levinas and states this is “not accidental” (p. 105), as both challenge the classic liberal conception of individualism (p. 111).
- It seems to her that something different is happening when people from different parts of the globe are morally outraged by events and actions in other parts of the globe where there is no shared language or physical proximity. “In such cases, we are seeing and enacting the very activity of bonds of solidarity that emerge across space and time” (p. 100).
- The images of the suffering of others sometimes operate as an ethical solicitation that comes from outside and Butler wants to suggest that these ethical obligations are not based upon consent or based on contracts or agreements we deliberately enter into. She also wants to contest the idea that ethical obligations only arise amongst those bound by established communities within borders, unified by the same language, constituting a people or a nation (p.103).
- Butler attempts to negotiate “the multilocality and cross temporality of ethical connections we might rightly call global” (p. 105) and develop a version of cohabitation that follows from this. Butler reads Levinas “against himself” for the political potentialities of a global ethics beyond religious and cultural communities.
Butler takes issue with Arendt’s understanding of the public/private realms suggesting the private is not the opposite of the political, but is part of its definition (p. 206). Specifically, Butler disagrees with Arendt’s claim that the needs of the body belong in the private sphere.

As well, she challenges Arendt’s claim that human beings are properly political when they emerge into the public realm as speaking beings, where the space of appearance forms the basis for political action. For Butler, appearance includes visible presence and spoken words but it can also include networked representation and concerted acts of silence (p. 172).

“The performative power of the people does not first rely on words. Assembly only makes sense if bodies can and do connect in some way, and then speech acts that unfold from there articulate something that is already happening at the level of the plural body” (p. 174). She makes the broad existentialist claim that everyone is precarious based on their social existence as bodily beings that depend on each other for sustenance and shelter.

Further, our precarity is dependent upon the organisation of economic and social relationships and their relation to sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. “My point is not to rehabilitate humanism but, rather, to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity” (p. 119).
Notes towards a performative theory of Assembly

• In the final chapter, Butler takes up a question posed by Adorno; how does one lead a good life in a bad life? She is specifically interested in the relationship between morality, and ethics more generally and social and economic theory.

• Overall, this book provides a point of departure for a new politics of the body that starts with an understanding of the link between human dependency and interdependency, one that accounts for a relation between precarity and performativity.

• Moreover, it provides a rethinking of contemporary new social movements and their relationship to radical democratic struggles extending Butler’s work on the development of an anti-humanist human who depends on other bodies for social survival more generally.
Conclusion

• Theorising the anti-humanist human
• Agency, freedom and the politics of the political
• Phenomenology and post-structuralism – the politics of bodies
• From performativity to precarity: *Gender Trouble* to post Sept 9/11
• Butler and *Gender Trouble* – not just apply to feminism but to a subversion of identity that extends beyond feminism
• Butler and political theorising
• Doing, not being – beyond identity politics – from ‘what’ to ‘who’
• A politics of bodies and the human – a pre-discursive appearance as the basis of a post-Left coalitional politics