

Key Contemporary Thinkers

judith

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**Judith Butler**

**From Norms to Politics**

**Moya Lloyd**

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## Abbreviations

AC	<i>Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death</i>
BTM	<i>Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'</i>
'CF'	'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of "Postmodernism"'
CHU	<i>Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left</i> (with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek)
'CR'	'For a Careful Reading'
'CS'	'Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification'
'End'	'The End of Sexual Difference?'
ES	<i>Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative</i>
GAO	<i>Giving an Account of Oneself</i>
'GB'	'Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution'
'GP'	'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler'
GT	<i>Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity</i> (Tenth Anniversary Edition)
'GTFT'	'Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse'

'HB'	'How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler'
'Imitation'	'Imitation and Gender Insubordination'
'Kinship'	'Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?'
'OSRM'	'On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler'
'PA'	'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'
PL	<i>Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence</i>
PLP	<i>The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection</i>
SD	<i>Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France</i>
'SG'	'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's <i>Second Sex</i> '
'UC'	'Universality in Culture'
UG	<i>Undoing Gender</i>
'VSG'	'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault'
'WC'	'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue'

## Acknowledgements

Writing a book about any living author is difficult, and particularly one as prolific as Judith Butler. Indeed, twice, the submission of this manuscript was held up because Butler published new volumes that I wanted to examine. It needs to be remembered when reading this book, therefore, that what I am evaluating is not a completed body of work but one that is on-going. It also means that it has been impossible to judge the full significance of Butler's work, particularly since, given the slowness of the publication process, responses to *Precarious Life* and *Undoing Gender* are only just beginning to appear while, as yet, there has been nothing published on *Giving an Account of Oneself* that I am aware of. The readings I present of these later books are, therefore, very much my own provisional readings. I hope, however, that they convey something of the excitement and intellectual stimulation that I feel when I encounter Butler's always challenging, always provocative, if not always convincing, theoretical offerings.

Numerous people have contributed to the development of this book. First, I would like to thank the two anonymous readers at Polity for their reports on the draft. I hope I have managed to respond to your criticisms adequately, though, of course, any remaining errors or omissions are mine. Conversations with Laura Brace, Terrell Carver, Samuel Chambers, Diana Coole, Mark Hoffman, Kimberly Hutchings, Birgit Schippers and Andrew Thacker on different aspects of Butler's work, as well as on the factors shaping it, helped me clarify my argument. These discussions also gave me immense enjoyment, not least when



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Parts of Chapter 4 are drawn from 'Politics and Melancholia', *Women's Philosophy Review*, 20 (1998–9), pp. 25–43. Reproduced with the permission of the Society of Women in Philosophy.

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<b>1 Introduction</b>	1
Feminism, identity and difference	4
From homosexual to gay and lesbian to queer	7
The influence of poststructuralism	10
Hegel and desiring subjects	13
Postscript	23
<b>2 Rethinking Sex and Gender</b>	25
The trouble with women	25
Feminism and the sex/gender debate	28
Denaturalizing sex <i>and</i> gender	30
Cultural intelligibility – contesting heteronormativity	33
From phenomenology to performativity	36
Performing gender	42
Women in/and feminism	44
Conclusion	46
<b>3 Towards a Subversive Gender Politics</b>	49
From parody to politics	50
Subversive gender politics	51
Performativity and subversion	54

Free will versus determinism	57
Enter iterability	61
The ambivalence of drag	66
The matter of bodies	68
Politicizing abjection – making bodies matter	74
Conclusion	76
<b>4 Psychoanalysis and the Gendered Subject</b>	<b>78</b>
<i>Gender Trouble</i> and psychoanalysis	79
Rubin and 'The Traffic in Women'	80
Freud and Oedipus	82
Melancholic gender identifications	83
Melancholia and performativity	85
Lacan and Oedipus	88
Assuming sex	89
Locating resistance	91
Kinship matters	93
Psychic subjectivity	97
Passionate attachment and primary dependency	99
Resisting Butler	102
Conclusion	105
<b>5 'Talking Back' – Resignification and Politics</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>Words that Wound</i>	108
The force of the performative	110
Opposing sovereign performatives	113
A linguistic account of subjectivity	115
Linguistic subjectivity and responsibility	118
Revisiting agency – politics and resignification	120
Against the state	126
Conclusion	133
<b>6 What Makes for a Liveable Life?</b>	<b>134</b>
Normative violence and questions of liveability	135
Corporeal vulnerability	138
Mourning and grief	141
Questions of recognition	143
What's wrong with 'desiring the state's desire'?	146
The politics of radical democracy	148

## *Contents*

ix

Cultural translation	150
Conclusion	154

<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Bibliography</i>	182
<i>Index</i>	197

# 1

## *Introduction*

In 1990 one of the most influential books of the coming decade was published: *Gender Trouble*. Routinely cited in disciplines from literary theory to cultural studies, sociology to political theory, philosophy to performance studies, *Gender Trouble* has also been translated into twenty languages, while in 1999 a special tenth anniversary edition was published, complete with comprehensive new preface.<sup>1</sup> These twin publications of *Gender Trouble* book-ended a decade in which its author, Judith Butler, received the rare accolade (for an academic, at least) of being cited in *The Face* – a British style magazine – as one of fifty people who had the greatest influence on popular culture in the 1990s. It is not often that a scholar, a professional philosopher (she is the Maxine Elliot Professor in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley), achieves iconic status. So, why did Butler? *Gender Trouble* wasn't her first book. That place is reserved for *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, published in 1987 and then also reprinted in 1999 (with a new preface). It wasn't her last. At the time of writing, there have been seven single-authored monographs since then, two co-edited books, as well as three co-authored texts.<sup>2</sup> Yet *Gender Trouble* is the text most closely associated with the name of Judith Butler: so what precisely is the basis of its appeal?

Slavoj Žižek suggests one answer when he argues that *Gender Trouble* was not only a timely piece of theoretical work. More significantly, it both inspired and legitimized 'a specific *political* practice', namely, the 'anti-identarian turn of queer politics'.<sup>3</sup> Although

the influence of *Gender Trouble* on queer theory and politics cannot be overestimated, what Žižek misses is the enormous impact the book had on feminism. Butler, one critic notes, is 'the single most cited feminist theorist of the 1990s', while another points out that *Gender Trouble* 'rocked the foundations of feminist theory'.<sup>4</sup> *Gender Trouble* has been credited not only with defining the way that the relation between feminism and postmodernism has played out but also with setting the terms of the feminist debate about identity, both in the US and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the merits of these competing interpretations, in order to understand the significance of Butler's work it is necessary to understand something of the context in which it was written and of the kinds of debates that were taking place then.

The 1970s saw the emergence of the 'new social movements'. These movements, including the women's, civil rights, and gay and lesbian liberation movements as well as the anti-nuclear and environmental movements, brought about a change in the political landscape. Class politics began to recede as identity and lifestyle politics came to the fore. It is identity politics that is of particular interest to us. Identity politics operates with the assumption that one's identity – as a woman, or gay man, or African American – furnishes the grounds for a collective politics. This politics typically has a dual purpose: to overcome the forms of oppression and marginalization that group members experience (both collectively and individually), which limit their participation in democratic society, and to create greater opportunities for group self-determination. Identity politics can thus be seen in developments as diverse as anti-discrimination legislation, demands for group quotas, and in the challenging of group stereotypes. Undoubtedly, these new social movements had significant political impact. During the 1980s, however, those based on identity (particularly the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement) soon began to experience certain difficulties in speaking of and for their constituencies. It is here that *Gender Trouble* is pertinent, for it is a central text in the debates on identity that took place in both movements.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that the critique of identity within either the women's or gay and lesbian movements began with Butler. Two years prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*, for instance, Denise Riley had already published *Am I That Name?*, a highly significant book exploring the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the category of women, a book moreover that Butler herself cites as instrumental to the development of her own work

on gender.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, throughout the 1980s, questions had been raised in gay and lesbian circles about the notion of homosexuality as an identity category. Here the work of Michel Foucault (himself frequently identified as the initiator of queer politics) was central. More generally, the work of Butler (and, indeed, of many other contributors to the debates about identity in both feminism and gay and lesbian theory/politics) owes much to the discourses on the 'crisis of the subject' that punctuated French theory from the mid-1960s onwards. In Butler's case, this includes writings by Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, as well as the work of poststructuralists such as Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida.<sup>7</sup> In order to situate Butler's work more clearly, the next three sections will focus, respectively, on the debates immanent to feminism concerning identity and difference; the political developments within gay and lesbian movements that fostered identity critique and that led to the emergence of queer theory; and the broad terms of poststructuralism.

Although *Gender Trouble* is best located in terms of the above debates, since they explain the context of its composition and reception, both this text and Butler's writings more broadly engage with and are influenced by a range of other work, including the existentialist phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir and the materialist feminism of Monique Wittig (both discussed in the next chapter), the feminist anthropology of Gayle Rubin and the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud (both discussed in Chapter 4), and the philosophical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and G. W. F. Hegel. Although I touch briefly on Nietzsche's work in the next chapter, I devote more attention to Butler's debt to Hegel since, as she herself declares in the 1999 preface to *Subjects of Desire*, '[i]n a sense, all of my work remains within the orbit of a certain set of Hegelian questions' (SD: xiv). This engagement with Butler's Hegelianism – and, more specifically, with her interest in the relation between desire and recognition bequeathed by Hegel – begins in the final part of this chapter, where I examine *Subjects of Desire*, the revised version of Butler's doctoral thesis. I should make clear, however, that my aim in this book is *not* to provide an exhaustive and detailed account of all the theories that have impacted on the development of Butler's ideas. Such an enterprise would, I fear, be impossible. Nor is it to trace the influence of any one thinker on her work. Instead, my focus is threefold: first, I concentrate on elucidating and evaluating the arguments that Butler herself advances; second, I situate those arguments, as far as possible, in terms of the critical responses from

*feminists* that they have elicited, though inevitably I have had to be selective here; and, finally, I pay particular attention to Butler's *political* theory, that is, to the ways in which she understands political activity and transformation. Before we turn to the substance of her ideas, as I indicated above, it is first vital to have a sense of the intellectual and political background of her writings. I begin, therefore, with feminist debates on identity and difference.

## Feminism, identity and difference

Feminism is a political movement organized around transforming the lives of women. To begin with, therefore, one of the primary aims of feminist scholarship was to contest the male-stream definitions of woman circulating in culture and society at the time of writing. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, a text that was highly influential on Butler, exemplifies this aim perfectly. Here Beauvoir set out to demonstrate that humanity in a number of fields tended to be conceived of in terms of men and the male prerogative while woman was, quite simply, the 'second sex': weaker and essentially other to man. There was (and is) of course plenty of empirical evidence to back up women's inferior position in society at large: women's disqualification from many walks of life on the basis of suspect, masculinist conceptions of their nature, psychology, behaviour, and so forth. Important as it was to subject such misogynistic characterizations to radical critique, a later generation of feminists went a stage further. They articulated a feminism that was not parasitic on male-stream theorizing, as Marxist feminism or liberal feminism purportedly were, but was specifically woman-centred. Feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Robin Morgan and Mary Daly thus began to develop a gynocentric political theory and practice of, by and about women. It aimed to analyse women's oppression from women's distinct perspective, to revalue femaleness and femininity, and to forge a political movement that foregrounded women as women. This feminism, 'feminism unmodified' as Catharine MacKinnon famously called it, or 'radical feminism' as it was otherwise known, had a huge impact.<sup>8</sup> As Judith Grant suggests, its gynocentric focus radically altered the feminist agenda of the day, by politicizing ideas such as the body, sexuality and housework, and developing practices (such as consciousness-raising) that enabled the production of woman-centred knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Robyn Rowland and Renate Klein note, it also created 'a



new political and social theory of women's oppression'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, radical feminism, it has been suggested, represents the first full articulation of feminist ideas *per se*.<sup>11</sup>

Generating woman-centred theory and politics was not, however, without its now very well-documented problems. These centred on the difficulty of trying to develop an account of women that could fit *all* women. Critics argued that rather than being universally applicable, such theories were, in fact, solipsistic (that is, based on the experiences of particular women), essentialist, ahistorical, over-generalized and partial.<sup>12</sup> Such was the effect of these debates that, for some time, feminism appeared to be characterized more by factionalism amongst competing groups than by the sisterhood and unity envisaged by its earliest exponents. Although there was some attempt to redress these difficulties by articulating feminist political theories more attuned to the specific experiences of different groups of women – for instance, lesbians or women with disabilities or Black women – even these accounts were accused of excluding certain women from their analyses, of silencing others and of failing to recognize the inter-connected nature of ethnic, class and gender identity.<sup>13</sup>

When radical feminists attempted to develop woman-centred theory, they were, of course, responding to one of the key intellectual problems faced by all forms of feminism: 'Who or what is a woman?'<sup>14</sup> Is it Woman, the singular noun with a capitalized 'W', a shorthand term for the idea that all women share an essential connection with one another through the fact of being female? Or it is it women, the plural noun with a lower-case 'w', a descriptive sociological category referring to real historical women in all their variety? When they wrote about Woman in the singular, many feminists certainly assumed that their writings were relevant to living, breathing women in the plural. Their priority was simply to identify what it was that women shared – what identity – that could form the grounds upon which to build a collective emancipatory politics. As a result of the ensuing criticisms of this project, noted earlier, some feminists turned their attention to the pressing issue of how to deal with the differences between women, and in such a way as to keep alive the possibilities of a united political movement.<sup>15</sup> These were the diversity feminists. By contrast, another group turned their attention to French theory, broadly understood, and began to focus on what might be called the indeterminacy of woman: that is, the idea that Woman as such does not exist. These were the *différance* feminists.