Key Contemporary Thinkers

Judith Butler

Moya Lloyd
Judith Butler
For
Andrew and Daniel
Judith Butler

From Norms to Politics

Moya Lloyd

polity
Key Contemporary Thinkers

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<td>‘<strong>GTFT</strong>’</td>
<td>‘Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse’</td>
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Abbreviations

‘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 Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence

PLP The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection

SD Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France

‘SG’ ‘Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex’

‘UC’ ‘Universality in Culture’

UG Undoing Gender

‘VSG’ ‘Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault’

‘WC’ ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’
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
accompanied by good food and wine! Thanks also to John Thomp-
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thanks go to my partner, Andrew Thacker, for listening to me talk
endlessly about Butler, learning just how long it takes me to ‘finish
a sentence’, and giving so generously of his time as this book neared
completion, and to our son Daniel for distracting me when I needed
it and for making each day so much fun. This book is dedicated
to them.

Parts of Chapter 4 are drawn from ‘Politics and Melancholia’,
the permission of the Society of Women in Philosophy.
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. 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. 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’. 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’.

*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. 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.
Introduction

on gender. 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. 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 politi-
cal 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, there-
fore, 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 defini-
tions 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 evi-
dence 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, behav-
ior, 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 para-
sitic 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 femi-
ninity, 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. As Judith Grant suggests,
its gynocentric focus radically altered the feminist agenda of the
day, by politicizing ideas such as the body, sexuality and house-
work, and developing practices (such as consciousness-raising) that
enabled the production of woman-centred knowledge. Furthermore,
as Robyn Rowland and Renate Klein note, it also created ‘a
new political and social theory of women’s oppression’. Indeed, radical feminism, it has been suggested, represents the first full articulation of feminist ideas per se.

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. 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.

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?’ 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 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. 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 différence feminists.
Diversity feminism, as the name suggests, concentrated on understanding the variety of experiences of being female. The question its proponents pondered was not just how to understand differences amongst women but, more importantly, how to understand the nature of the relation between different aspects of a woman’s identity – her race, sexual orientation and class – and how these fitted with her femaleness. Was, for instance, a Black lesbian oppressed as a woman and as a Black person and as a lesbian, or was she oppressed as a Black lesbian woman? Could, that is, the different elements of her identity be separated out or were they inextricably entwined? Some feminists argued for the former: that it was possible to identify the different forms of oppression to which a woman was subject, and thus to deal with them separately.\textsuperscript{16} Others contested this view and argued that sexism, racism, and homophobia, for example, worked through each other; that the relation between them was an interlocking or ‘intersectional’ relation.\textsuperscript{17}

The other strand of feminism that is pertinent to the discussion at hand is what I have referred to as \textit{différance} feminism, or what is sometimes called deconstruction feminism.\textsuperscript{18} As I am using these terms here, it refers to the work \textit{within the Anglo-American context} of those feminists who drew on the writings of thinkers such as Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, as well as on Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. Despite significant differences between these French theorists, what most share is the idea that the subject is always in process (that is, is always incomplete in some sense) and that language, discourse and/or power (depending on the thinker) are central to its constitution. Taken up by \textit{différance} feminists, these insights have been used to contest or ‘deconstruct’ the very category of Woman upon which radical feminism was predicated. Although Butler acknowledges some of the concerns of diversity feminism in her writing, her own work might reasonably be characterized as a form of \textit{différance} feminism.

The impact of diversity and \textit{différance} feminism both on the women’s movement and on feminist political thinking was profound. Deconstructing the idea of a unified feminist subject seemed to put at risk the very politics of feminism. If women do not exist, who is feminism supposed to liberate? Diversity and \textit{différance} feminism raised difficult questions for political representation, for justice and for an understanding of political agency. Just who is supposed to be represented if, because of their diversity, women are not representable \textit{as women}? How can the claims of universal justice be