

¿Philosophy Or Activism? Interview with Judith Butler

Dorsal Journal. At the beginning of your career you take over Foucault's work and use it and develop it constantly, both as a starting point to your own reflections, as well as for criticizing other positions. In the past ten years, conversely, it is noticeable how your interest in other analyses has replaced this constant use of Foucault. This has become apparent, for instance, in your last book Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly (2015), in which you talk about the Theory of Assembly. It is so even in Senses of the subject (2015), although, surprisingly enough, its subject matter seems to be quite close to Foucault's philosophy, and yet he does not feature as prominently as one would have expected (other than your resorting to him in the Introduction where you showed the possible and "faltering" unity of the collection). What lies behind your gradual abandonment of Foucault's reflections? Is it maybe an assumption of Foucault's analyses, which nevertheless produces in silence? Are you on the lookout, perhaps deliberately, to find fresh and new reflections that could be helpful to tackle these subjects?

Judith Butler. I am not aware of having abandoned Foucault. In the Tanner lectures that I gave at Yale in 2016 which will be published in revised form with Verso next year, I spend quite a lot of time with Society Must be Defended. So he remains important to me. I was aware, though, that he could not answer some questions about psychoanalysis that I continue to have. I was also aware that he could not provide a political philosophy of collective action, and have turned to Arendt increasingly in recent years for that purpose. Foucault offered me an important way to think about subject formation within discourse and power. I pursued that as much as I could in *The Psychic Life of Power*, and found that he could not account for the unconscious or for forms of self-destruction that required psychoanalytic perspectives. And though his idea of the subject is certainly not the same as the individual, there seemed to be no way to think about forms of acting in concert or forms of world-making that happen in among people – social

forms. I have been searching for a theoretical vocabulary to strengthen my critique of individualism, especially in light of a popular reading of my early work as restricted by ideas of individual freedom. Self-making is an important notion, but does it ever happen without the pull of self-destruction, or a potential of undoing.

D. J. When it comes to reflecting on the task of philosophy, what the notions of living and thinking really mean, you seem to rely on the foucaultian notion of "critique" as virtue (or the nietzschean notion of "free spirit"); also, you seem to refer to it as an impulse that cannot be relinquished, a desire to push your own thinking, and the rules that allow us to become subjects, to the limits. For some years you worked along these lines, in keeping with Foucault's, in connection to ideas of performativity and gender. Where do you stand, right now, in relation to the importance of philosophy, when philosophy is understood as performative, that is, as a form of resistance and re-appropriation?

J. B. My sense is that Foucault's notion of critique continues to be important insofar as it exposes the limits of any field of intelligibility. He does not do this in order to celebrate the unintelligible, as some critics have argued. Rather, the limits of one field can become the opening to another form of thought, one that is not yet established as a field of intelligibility, but remains critical - mindful - of the normative dimensions of any such field. Critique, though, also has to do with an engaged form of thinking that seeks to understand the historical conditions of our own thinking. This is to be found in the Frankfurt School, but also in Hegel and Marx. As we practice philosophy in the contemporary world, we are continually registering the historical world and its demands within the terms of our thought. How do we respond to those demands – demands to understand and to criticize – without reproducing the historical categories that constitute the problem? And further, how do we do this without acting as if we can escape history? I continue to think we need to understand how forms of thought become naturalized and normalized, but as we use those words, we have to be clear that we do not discount nature or normativity ('becoming natural is bad' or 'all norms have to be opposed'). Indeed, global warming is one such historical demand upon us, one that demands the development of norms that might make for a more liveable life, and a thriving environment. Critique remains negative to the extent that it is focused on the dismantling of forms of power that oppress, subjugate, and efface, but it is not finally negative: destruction is not its aim. It is an affirmative exercise that opens up a form of freedom within and beyond subjugation. Tony Negri and Michael Hardt suggested to me that perhaps it is the performativity of politics that we should be thinking about.

D. J. You have argued, following and polishing Foucault's arguments, at the course Mal faire, dire vrai. Fonction de l'aveu en justice (Leuven, 1981) that performative speech-acts about oneself, specifically about the truth of oneself, unravel the way subjects

bind to their own selves, by resorting to discursive forms power produces. Do you think helps show the continuity between, on one hand, reasoning about power analytics and the process of subjectivation that characterized his thought at first, and, on the other, reasoning about this very issue in the 1980s? Is it possible he breaks with or changes theoretically all along this process of reasoning?

J. B. My sense is that Foucault engaged in provocative and productive exaggeration in early pieces such as “The Death of the Author.” The author was regarded as the effect of writing; the subject, the effect of discourse. But he came to think more carefully about the mechanism and manner of that production with time. Indeed, with *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, we see a more elaborated account of reflexivity. If discourse/power produces the way a subject comes to regard or treat itself, if it enters into a reflexive process, then we are talking about the way reflexivity is formed. That is one aspect of subjectivation. If the subject also engaged in self-constitution, as it clearly does in forms of self-care and self-cultivation, then is it at once acted on by discourse/power and acting? Is its acting not the site or process of a reformulation or rearticulation of discourse/power? He becomes increasingly interested in the confessional, forms of self-disclosure, and self-exposition whether in religion or law, and this gives us a new sense of what subjects can do – and what they can, on occasion, refuse to do. It also gives us a sense of how forms of authority enter into our own modes of action, not as deterministic powers, but as ways of crafting the subject as it crafts itself.

D. J. In many passages of your work you argue with Nietzsche, whom you sometimes identify as the first reference for the denaturing discourse, that is, a discourse in which certain constructivism or logic of the production of power operates (animal capable of making promises) or, rather, as one of the first authors that see correctly the construction of identity, inexcusably passing through “the Other” (vulnerability of the “sovereign individual”). However, in your reflection on power you always regard Foucault’s analytical power as the starting point of analytical power, so much so that it seems that the foucaultian conception of power is not indebted, in general terms, to the nietzschean line (the “will to power” ontologically understood as a relational field of forces, actually as a plexus of dynamic relations from which different configurations of meaning and value constantly arise, and in which we can understand the idea of force as something essentially precarious). What is, in your opinion, the relationship between both authors? In what does Foucault’s analytic of power surpass that of Nietzsche’s? And, in this sense, is it possible to draw a line that runs through Nietzsche-Foucault-Butler?

J. B. I am less sure than you that I argue with Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s reflections on bad conscience are infinitely interesting to me, though I think sometimes that his versions of affirmation might be understood as manic. It is clear that Foucault’s

Discipline and Punish draws a great deal from Nietzsche's book entitled Dawn or Daybreak in English. There we find a brilliant analysis of legal punishment as creating the conscience upon which it depends. My own analyses depend on Nietzsche's in this way: the doer comes after the deed, is itself a construction of the deed. My worry about *Discipline and Punish* is that discipline works too well. In the late reflections on law that Foucault provides, he shows us more clearly how a subject is formed and forms itself in relation to the discursive and theatrical demands of the law. But resistance is also possible there, as it is in the domain of sexuality. But students, as I am sure you know, are startled to find that for Foucault where there is sexuality there is resistance, but where there is law or discipline, there is not. That changes as he proceeds. More recently I am interested in trying to think about moral philosophy that does not depend upon the self-lacerations of conscience or the aggressions of the super-ego. When ethics depends on a relation to the other, then it is a relational problem, and not an internal struggle against a potentially annihilating aspect of one's own psyche. That strikes me as a more productive way to think.

D. J. In your doctoral dissertation, released in 1984, although later published in 1987 as Subjects of desire. Hegelian reflections in Twentieth-century France (1987), you tackled Foucault's notion of power from a perspective that critically approaches Hegelian postulates specifically the dialectics of master and slave. Thenceforth, up until the early 2000s, we have witnessed other approaches to this notion of power in your work. What types of variations has the concept of power undergone or from which perspective can we understand the variations of the use of foucaultian concept in your work?

J. B. I think this is probably a question for critics and commentators. I do not track my own usages and do not strive for consistency. Since I am, sadly or not, a living author, I am engaged with thinking, which means I do not stay with the same thought or try to produce a consistent or systematic body of thought. It all depend on what I am trying to think.

D. J. Most of your work can be construed as sets of reflections on concepts like vulnerability, interpellation, recognition and subjectivation. These notions are marked by the conception of power and the possibility of critique of Foucault, as we have already mentioned. To what extent the differences between your theory of recognition and that of Axel Honneth's reproduce the discussion between Foucault and Habermas? What can you tell us about the possibility of synthesis or mutual enrichment between critical theory and your work?

J. B. There is a strong alliance between my work and the critical theories to which you refer insofar as we all start with the primary Hegelian thesis that the

self is constituted socially in its relation to others, and that without this social mediation there can be no self. If we try to derive a normative theory from this Hegelian condition, we may take different paths. Honneth sets aside the theory of determinate negation and negativity in general in his reading of Hegel. For me, the life and death struggle remains central. Our ethical relations have to come to terms with the potential for destruction that resides in every social bond. Ambivalence is a feature of human relationality and of social bonds. In this sense, I am closer to linking Hegel with Freud. But Honneth links Hegel more closely with Winnicott. The relational dimension of Winnicott is important for my work, to be sure, but I worry there that problem of aggression and violence is left to theorists such as Klein.

D. J. There is currently a controversy between feminist movements in Spain in relation to surrogacy. The dispute mostly focuses on the limits of the autonomy of the body. Some feminists assert that surrogacy poses a means of control over women's sexuality and it should not be regulated in any case. They argue that in a context of economic vulnerability one could never be able to choose freely. However, other feminists believe that claiming this means denying the ability of decision-making to women with low incomes. This question recalls the debate about whether prostitutes are, actually, free to decide or not. What is your opinion on this matter?

J. B. I do not have a settled view. In my view, a woman has the right to decide what to do with her own body as long as it does not hurt another. Many who oppose surrogacy base their views on traditional notions of the family, heterosexual reproduction, and romantic ideas about biological ties that tend to devalue other ties of kinship, especially adoption. So we need to examine the reasons people give for objecting to a choice that another woman makes about how to use her body, how to make money, or how to lend a service. Do we have the same objections to sperm donors? They are also lending a service. In general, I am suspicious of views that seek to discount the choices of women and keep them in a position of structural powerlessness. That does not seem helpful.

D. J. The opposition to political correctness has always been a critical and subversive attitude on behalf of the left; lately, however, the right has used this concept to attack disadvantaged groups, like women or immigrants (the clearest example being Trump's victory). Moreover, the left seems to have abandoned that critical attitude which featured prominently in the nineties. In 2014, Jack Halberstam published a post in which he denounced the rise of a certain rhetoric within queer communities that produces an atmosphere of censorship. He compared the current situation with the context of cultural feminism and lesbian separatism of the 70s and 80s, which typically saw people with poorly managed or easily susceptible traumas and who constantly

claimed to feel hurt because of other's poorly phrased questions or inappropriate choice of words. In this context, people had to make adjustments: they tried to avoid patriarchal language; they had to think before speaking and spent their time sharing painful experiences. Halberstam affirmed they ended up turning into psychosomatic, anti-sex, anti-fun and anti-porn subjects. He points out that there is a revival of this type of behavior, and denounces difficulties to organize any type of activity without complaints about the use of language nowadays. In most cases, groups that feel offended demand apologies, as well as actual elimination of the offensive part of the discourse, work or event. We have reached a point whereupon even the use of a reclaimed word by queer subjects produces this kind of response. He does not hesitate to qualify this as censorship.

Considering the present-day context, it seems that it is becoming increasingly difficult to carry out queer politics of re-appropriation of insults whilst the right gains ground with rhetoric of political incorrectness'. Do you think queer communities have been influenced by an atmosphere of political correctness? In that case, does this mean the right is setting the political agenda nowadays?

J. B. I wonder whether “political correctness” is the right word here. I think that there is an ongoing struggle for recognition on the left, and ongoing concern about being effaced by the terms that define the left. What if we started with socialism, and asked what kind of unity it presupposed? Who was left out? Who wanted to be included? As soon as “women” become a new category, we learn that that category also has to be thought about carefully since surely trans women are women as well. I think that we have to move beyond the subject of politics as an end itself to focus on the general aims of equality, justice, and freedom. As we gather to realize those ideals, we will come into conflict about who “we” are. But that conflict is only useful if the reason we want to sort it is to move forward with a broader politics, so that the politics of identity is not its own end.

D. J. After the success of the #metoo campaign, devoted to denounce sexual harassment, a controversy arose due to a manifesto signed by a hundred French artists and intellectuals, thereby accusing this movement of promoting a climate of puritanism and victimization. Are we facing a conservative reaction against feminism or a legitimate denounce against a moralist trend? Do you think the debate informs a cultural battle between France and USA regarding sexuality?

J. B. It seems to me that the signatories of that letter lost their common purpose within a day or so of its publication, so it makes sense to ask why. There is a difference of opinion on how deep and systematic the oppression of women is, and whether that oppression is rightly named as seduction, for instance, or whether it should be restricted to harassment and rape. In the US, it appeared as if the

allegations were supposed to count as evidence; otherwise, it would seem that we, too, were not taking the claims of women seriously. And yet, allegations can never suffice as evidence of a crime there has to be due process, and some allegations are wrong or distorted, and that needs to be considered in a way that draws upon evidence and insure due process. Every gay or lesbian person has known about the “homosexual panic” defense in which someone who is homophobic accuses a LGBTQ person of trying to seduce them. It is most often hallucinatory. What are the protections against the reanimation of that monstrous legal alibi that has justified acts of violence against LGBTQ people? Some feminists say that the courts have failed us so that now men should be tried in the media. But that is the wrong way to approach the media. It makes it into a theatre of cruelty. So the paradox that we are left with is how to acknowledge the pervasive character of sexual harassment and violence at the same time that we make sure legal processes do not allow for the destruction of those falsely accused. Both sexual violence and false accusation are real harms. So let’s start with that agreement and see where we end up.