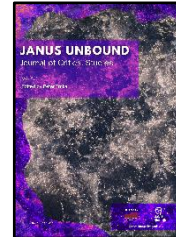


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The Butlerian revolution. On *Judith Butler and Politics* by Adriana Zaharijevic.

Margherita Pascucci

Adriana Zaharijevic, *Judith Butler and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 248 pages.

*“It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses **revolutionary force**.”*

—Foucault, *Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life*

Adriana Zaharijevic’s *Judith Butler and Politics* is a precious book. It gives us the first comprehensive, beautiful, strong insight into the ethical-political thought of Judith Butler’s entire *oeuvre*, and it does so with extreme philosophical depth and accuracy. It highlights themes that point forward to a future yet unknown, which are ethically and politically relevant in our lives today.

Zaharijevic’s approach to Butler’s work, the book’s main thread, lies in making visible *the infrastructure of the insurrection at the level of ontology* central to Butler’s thought.

For those of us who have followed Butler’s work closely over the years, *Judith Butler and Politics* provides insights for today for our ethico-political stance as thinkers, human beings, and activists.¹

We are in the time of a Butlerian revolution. Let me explain, going through the pages of *Judith Butler and Politics*, why.

A philosophical, ethical and political revolution

The importance of Butler’s thought takes effect at three levels: philosophically and at a singular level (revolution of the subject); ethically, as citizens of the world (alienation transformed into vulnerability); and politically or ethico-politically, for each of us as activists (nonviolence as an acknowledgment of social relations).

Philosophically. Butler has opened a new path for understanding the contemporary subject and **nature**. I would dare to say, in the tradition of Immanuel Kant, overcoming his scaffolding regarding the limits of knowledge and apply-

ing these limits to one's definition of the self as given by society, by the 'ordering nature,' by the law. In her reading of this 'becoming self,' in our 'giving us over to the world,' these limits are undone from the inside. The subject is no longer such: unanchored from an 'ordering nature,' it is a 'becoming self.'

She innovates, thus, the history of philosophy.

Ethically. Butler has, in the tradition of Michel Foucault, and expanding on Baruch Spinoza, shown that the 'openness of the self' (remember Foucault: the thought of the outside), from which originates the notion of vulnerability, is also the composing principle of becoming a 'liveable life': we are all interdependent, and this inextricable interdependency is the very material of our own being. This 'openness' goes both ways: we are **open**, always on the *threshold of an unknown*, and at the same time, *being exposed to this unknown*, we are **vulnerable** to it. The vulnerability can be exposure to violence, to 'fascist passions,' or openness to a plus of *potentia*, of capacity to act, openness to joyful affects, and joyful militancy of our own lives. **Vulnerability** implies the multitudinous, collective body, the acknowledgment, the recognition of the 'other' as constitutive of the 'I' (**interdependency**). We are vulnerable, cohabiting, and liveable lives (where -ability increases when encountering others).

She expands, thus, and strengthens the history of ethics.

Politically. From the tradition of Hannah Arendt (agency, cohabitation) and Walter Benjamin (messianism as arrest to violence/law/coercive State), Butler is taking the strong position of the true intellectual, the new immaterial labourer, if I may. Ruba Salih, in the Bologna conference 'Fascist passions' (April 2024), said that Butler embodies, for her, Edward Said's figure of the intellectual: the one who *speaks truth to power*. For me, too, Butler speaks truth to power: first to Israel, for decades, to all those powers who cage us in precarious, not-liveable, un-counting lives. She speaks truth to power and to us, too, intellectuals, producers of knowledge, activists, or those invited to become so.

Moreover, this truth she speaks to power is universal; no longer can it be sectarian of a country, of a state, of a people. Truth is nonviolent, even when it needs to turn violent to violate mystification.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari said that literature is a people's concern. I would add that philosophy is the **unseen consciousness of that people**—whereas sociology is this consciousness come to expression; political science its enactment—the thought-voice-praxis that knows the truth at the bottom of power's machinations. It is up to us to speak it out loud.

We should speak this truth. Butler does it with the force of a single yet multitudinous being. Philosophy and social sciences today, in our contemporaneity, should see and know what can speak truth to power. We should take it as our responsibility to recognize it and say it out loud, to make it the knowledge of the people and the people's knowledge. Politics would be thus hit by an ethical demand, by an *insurrection at the level of ontology*. The transformation should be radical: radical equality, radical justice of life, radical freedom of subjectivity. And if Butler is not alone in speaking truth to power and in 'doing' truth to power, I hope we all will do the same with her.

Revolution A: Agency

Of the book's many conceptual and practical threads, let me just focus on three elements that Zaharijevic highlights: **agency, gender, violence**.

'Agency' marks here a new ethical stance, we could call it the "Butlerian revolution": from the Kantian 'critique' to Foucault's notion of critique, we arrive at Butler's opening of oneself and pushing the limits—made known by critique—to challenge the "knowable, the thinkable, the sayable" (Zaharijevic, 28); what historically has been 'deemed' as unthinkable and unspeakable becomes thinkable, becomes speakable thus "breaking through the prohibitions that enable and structure the established truth and real" (28). This breaking through is "endowed with an insurrectionary force" that "produces the new" (28). (It is a messianic action, we will see).

What Butler is doing philosophically and acting ethico-politically is the **opening of the subject** to a new 'being-becoming-in the world.' an ethical stance which has in itself the insurrectionary force to break through the structure into which real and 'established' truth are cast.

This subject, which, according to Foucault's reading of Kant's *Anthropology*, is already no longer a 'subject' but a **passivity-spontaneity relation**, becomes, in Butler, in my view, a **passion-action relation** (Spinoza, Arendt); a **vulnerability-cohabitation** (Arendt, Butler); a **production of oneself in life**, striving to persevere in a just, happy life, **constituted *in fieri* by the encounter with others** (Spinoza); it is an **'insurrectionary inner force,'** a messianic 'redemption' (Benjamin, Butler).

How does this agency come about? How is it formed?

Let us start with the notion of 'critique.' There is a passage: 'critique' (Kant)—'critique' (Foucault)—limits (transformed in)to—abilities (Butler):

Critique is a practice of questioning the limits of what we are most certain we (think we) know. To question these limits is to push them because 'one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives' (Butler 2001a). (Zaharijevic 27, my emphasis)

It is as if Kant's "limits" were seen from the inside of life—of the self, of being—: now we need to push them to make the threshold overcome-able.

To push the limits in an already consumed crisis within the epistemological field, it is to say knowledge has been dried up by the crisis; we need:

to open oneself up to a critical attitude, to an 'art of not being governed like that and at that cost' (Foucault 2007a, 45)—which assumes that one is still within this very order, because another has not (yet) been found—it means to potentially suspend the ontological basis of the given order. Critique is a form of defiance against what Foucault calls the politics of truth, which orders our very basic ways of knowing and acting in the world, so basic that it refers to questions like 'what counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real?' (Butler 2001a). These questions take us back to the realm of the knowable, thinkable and sayable. They urge us to consider ways in which these realms have historically been cir-

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cumscribed by the unthinkable and the unspeakable. Such consideration, however, can only appear by breaking through the prohibitions that enable and structure the established truth and real. This breaking through is endowed with an insurrectionary force (Butler 1997a, 142) and can produce something new. (Zaharijevic 27, my emphasis)

So, critique as a questioning of the limits, as potential suspension of the ontological basis of the given order.

Agency is all this: critique, questioning of limits, potential suspension of the ontological basis of the given order, all endowed with an insurrectionary force.

Revolution B: The body

“Without a gender superstructure, the uterus and testicles are just another natural form of pistil and anthers.” (Zaharijevic, 69)

Butler’s discourse on gender is as radical as the question from which it began:

The question—can one become differently?—is, I would argue, the cornerstone of what will gradually become the theory of performativity (...) I argue that Butler sought to return the body to thought. But to make this possible, the ‘body as such’—an abstraction, a genderless body or a body imprisoned in sex—needs to be dislodged from thought and replaced by bodies understood as lived and plural processes of becoming. (Zaharijevic, 51, my emphasis)

In order to dislodge the body from thought, and as an attentive heir and interpreter of the philosophical Western tradition,² Butler traverses the binary of Western metaphysics, showing it openly and transforming it, *dragging* it to another consistency/ontology, to another discourse of being which is unanchored from the binary and the old categories of essence/existence, being/acting as it is from the separation body/thought, single/collective, I/Other, etc.

Zaharijevic underlines a telling example in Butler’s rereading of the episode of lord and bondsman in the struggle of self-consciousnesses in Hegel: “Butler reads this episode in quite a peculiar way, introducing a surprising corporeal dimension, absent in Hegel’s text” (52).

A similar widening can be seen with Spinoza. The lesson of Spinoza is so vivid, so present, to permeate, sometimes it seems to me, the invisible core of Butler’s revolution, her ethical stance, the motif of the transforming insurrection of ontology.³ Zaharijevic explains well, however, how, here, too, Butler widens the trace that, for example, Spinoza’s *conatus*, has in her: the desire to persist, the *conatus* is tied to the actuality of existence, and this actuality is composed by myriads of possibilities, of other lives inside ours—the blending of ‘I, you, the world’ that she proposes, opens the I to vulnerability. We assist thus here to the opening of Spinoza’s *conatus* to vulnerability.

If I may intervene with my own voice, Spinoza’s body is already *multitudinous*; it is a body composed of many bodies, as the mind is an expression of the body. Spinoza’s substance is the production of us, the modes: a constant swarming

of creation which makes time while it is constituted in life (bodies, minds, acts, language, etc.). And this constitution is restless, is teeming. By opening the multitudinous body/mind to vulnerability the risk is to miss the collective constitution of *potentia*, the *potentia* of *potentia*: *potentia* is the common in the singular, it is the relation of all the parts that we are, encounter, become, in an endeavour to produce further life. And yet, I understand Butler's move, politically and historically: only from the position of the vulnerable/vulnerated life can we see the possibility of overthrowing what *it is*. As Franz Kafka was writing: only from the position of someone fallen to the ground could I see the sky, and salvation. So, by questioning my own position—and what is the most fruitful act if not letting oneself be invested and transformed by Butler's thought—I could see the aspect added to Spinoza's *potentia*: the 'insurrection at the level of ontology' needs to take into account that intrinsic blind spot which is 'neg-ability': the to-be-able of liveable lives, of vulnerable lives. It should take into account all marginal, all rejected, all powerless lives made so by the very being into relation, into the world, which is society and our living time.

That is, "[w]hat Butler reads from Spinoza is that we persist in our own being only within 'the risky terms of social life:'"

To persist in one's being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one's own [. . .] *Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's 'own' being*. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality (1997b 28). (Zaharijevic, 147, my emphasis, see also 206)

The initial question on the body, "can one become differently," belongs to a more general parabola, where the body is unanchored from thought as it is from sex:

In order to grasp these processes to which Butler's entire oeuvre is devoted, the body is not to be equated with sex. [...] the body is given a chance to emancipate itself from its reified status in thought. In that sense, the question of becoming otherwise goes beyond the liberation of the female (body) from its path of otherness, from its imprisonment in sex. It equally demands emancipation of thought from the reduction of being to the duality of subject (as *res cogitans*) and the Other (as *res extensa*), where *res extensa* is lived either as the body or as the transcendence of the corporeal, that is, in which the body is, ultimately, the destiny of woman, whereas bodilessness is merely a possibility for man. (Zaharijevic, 52, my emphasis)

"For Butler, the body is never bodiless": bodies should be 'grasped differently': "as lived, plural, changing, vulnerable, capable of pleasure, exposed to violence, and yet also as the ground for freedom, not its limit" (Zaharijevic, 54). The body is material but, at the same time, also the space of possibilities of becoming.

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The groundbreaking move of this definition of the body brings with it the dismantling of property as the principle of subjectivity, an old subject which, along the old categories, defines the I as singular, mine, object of property of oneself.

I would dare to say with Butler—and Antonio Negri—that the Spinozian *causa sui* is indeed made by otherness. The political weight of this is punctuated by Butler’s entire oeuvre.

The emancipation of the body from duality (subject/other, *res cogitans/res extensa*) will germinate into the theory of performativity (“the theory of performativity sprang from Butler’s early commitment to the notion that the body is the necessary ground for freedom and a point of its mediation” (Zaharijevic, 54)) and of agency.

Zaharijevic (54-5) argues that:

Butler began to develop her theory of performativity out of the imperative to think bodies differently, in order to make the life of bodies more capacious. The idea of the body as the locus of sociality would become central for Butler’s later work, but its rhizomes can already be found in the early interpretations of gender, drawn from her readings of Beauvoir, through Hegel, Wittig, Rubin and Foucault.

Carefully explaining Butler’s position regarding other interpretations of gender, Zaharijevic clearly shows that: “It could be argued that the whole project of *Gender Trouble* is one extended polemic *against a desire for transcendence and its attendant political meaning*” (59, my italics).

Since the “link between sex and gender is not fixed,” it can be questioned; “becoming is not grounded in anatomy, biology or nature” but it is “part of the social/historical organization of reality”: the seed of the insurrection of performativity lies here because it is in gender itself that there is the possibility of “unmaking binary oppositions”: “Since gender is not fixed (in sex), Butler will conclude that *the possibilities for unmaking binary oppositions lie in gender itself*. As performative, gender appears more capacious and open for social lives of various bodies, that may have the capacity to change the society and power relations it rests upon” (Zaharijevic, 59, my emphasis).

Undoing Gender is thus the field for the liberation of the body, of the mind. And this open field has as lines of horizon “performance, enactment, appearance;” it is in this field that the struggle—rather: “the space of negotiation with the extant power relations”—between bodies and norms (the “two pillars of Butler’s theory of performativity” (Zaharijevic, 60)) occurs. Norms are the body imprisoned in “the truth of sex, in a fictitious aggregation of axiomatic meanings” (62).

The extraordinary strength of Butler’s transformative paradigm is adamant: the deconstruction of the prison of sex runs parallel with the deconstruction of axiomatic meanings, with the deconstruction of the grasp that power has on each one’s subjectivity. Because the body is the “locus through which

power prismatically refracts ... there is no point outside, prior to or beyond power, no site free from power” (Zaharijevic, 62).

Thus, Butler constructs subversion following Foucault’s strategy: rejecting “the possibility to transcend the binary opposites,” from within power, within the grip of binarity:

to subvert them is to have them proliferate to a point where binarity itself becomes meaningless. [Foucault’s] tactic, if that is what it can be called, is not to transcend power relations, but *to multiply their various configurations, so that the juridical model of power as oppression and regulation is no longer hegemonic*’ (Butler 1985: 514). Subversion, it seems, may function as a passageway to a new dispositive not based on binaries. Their relentless multiplication, brought to life by subversive practices, may derange the hegemony of the current system of norms. (Zaharijevic, 62 my emphasis)

To multiply the fugue points. From undoing gender, we are given a strategy for undoing power. It reminds me of Benjamin’s *allegoria*, and its tool the lens of *ustoria*. *allegoria* combusts all meaning and takes us—as in a fugue—to a point of new life. If in Benjamin’s baroque allegory life was seen from the corpse, here, with Butler, life is seen, is lived, from that possibility angle, of all the liveable, vulner-able lives which, by “multiplying their configurations” deprive power from its power (on us). By positioning us in that angle, the lens *ustoria* becomes visible, actable, and becomes a tool of revolution.

Gender is such a tool: “gender is a posterior, subsequential concept, serving as an explanatory tool for a more primary object of Butler’s consideration (...) at the core of her earlier, and I would argue also later, considerations on gender are, in fact, *bodies and acts*—that is, what one does with one’s body” (Zaharijevic, 63). Bodies and acts. What one does with one’s body. “The body is not a piece of matter, but ‘a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities’ ” (63). We are bodies “crafted into gender” (65). If to go out of gender is “to put one’s very existence into question” (Butler 1986, 41–2), by seeing how gender is established through our bodily acts, we can also see the possibility for transformation:

Gender, on the other hand, is a social or cultural effect of sex: since I was born female, I acquire feminine traits and become a woman. It is a discursive superstructure built on a prediscursive base, or a cultural construction drawn from the fixed natural substrate, becoming imbued with specific values through the action of various social forces. Without a gender superstructure, the uterus and testicles are just another natural form of pistil and anthers. (Zaharijevic, 69)⁴

It is material, it is corporeal, this body that navigates through norms but, exactly because it lives, its “corporeal processes become socially encoded and saturated with meanings that do not spring out of corporeity itself. Whatever the matter of our interiors, we materialise the possibilities according to what is available to us in the social world” (Zaharijevic, 73). Hence Butler’s question: “If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its construc-

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tedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?” (Butler 1999, 10–1, cited by Zaharijevic at 74).

The political core of this endeavour is striking:

My work has always been undertaken with the aim to expand and enhance a field of possibilities for bodily life. My earlier emphasis on denaturalization was not so much an opposition to nature as it was an opposition to the invocation of nature as a way of setting necessary limits on gendered life. To conceive of bodies differently seems to me part of the conceptual and philosophical struggle that feminism involves, and it can relate to questions of survival as well. The abjection of certain kinds of bodies, their inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility, does make itself known in policy and politics, and to live as such a body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology. (Butler quoted in Meijer and Prins 1998: 277, cited by Zaharijevic at 77)

To the widening of ontology, by endowing being with the -able (of liveable lives) is here added another fundamental notion: being unintelligible, being ‘improper,’ not recognized:⁵

The critical question—might such a reality be made differently (Butler 1999: xxiv), or might it be remade (Butler 2004a: 33)—is what invites an insurrection at the level on ontology. Instead of bodies changing, making them conform to what they are not—a strategy employed for centuries—in order not to be condemned to death within life (Butler 1999: xxi; Butler 2005), it is established norms that need to be transformed. (Zaharijevic, 77-8)

The insurrection at the level of ontology *means* to suspend the given order and from that -able space to invest it with all possible transformations.

Revolution C: Non-violence

The suspension of the ontological basis of a given order is “endowed with an insurrectionary force.” And this “insurrectionary force” is **nonviolence**.

We touch on the third element of Butler’s thought in the eyes of Zaharijevic: violence: “Butler’s entire opus can be understood as a philosophical struggle to reduce violence” (3, 184).

Against violence as not-acknowledgment of social relations, violence that “precedes and effectuates the not counting” of lives that do not count, as “intrinsic to proper ways of being” (Devenney 2020, 3), “differential value of life, counted” (Zaharijevic 2, 4); **nonviolence as a not-yet-known becoming** (messianic time), “**nonviolence, defined as a way of acknowledging social relation**” (Butler 2020, 9); “[n]onviolence thus appears as a performative perseverance in cohabitation, as ‘an experiment in living otherwise’ (Butler 2001b, 39) to the current configuration of continuous violation of social bonds” (Zaharijevic, 9, my emphasis).

Nonviolence as a way of acknowledging social relations: an entire world opens up for political science—or not? The old theoretical construction of the enemy crumbles down like a building constructed with poor material (yet

richly paid) during an earthquake. Nonviolence is the acknowledgment of social relations, the knowledge that the 'I' is constitutively made by the thousand others it encounters. The 'enemy', unknowable, un-composable with our life, opposite to us, fighting us, vanishes as an ugly dream.

Insurrection at the level of ontology

All three elements (agency, gender and violence) flow into: **insurrection at the level of ontology** which is the *Leitfaden*, the red thread of Zaharijevic's book and its reading of Butler's thought, which we could summarise as radically questioning the production of the differential value of lives:

the thread: how is it possible that some lives do not count as lives? From this question issue a series of others that shape the political thought of Judith Butler: how is the differential value of lives produced and maintained? *How does the counting itself effect violence?* How can a (human) life be lived if not counted? (4, my emphasis)

And again:

Liveability reveals a fundamental inequality in the midst of life, an inequality that demands insurrection at the level of ontology. The aim of this insurrection is to abolish the shadowy regions of the real that produce lives that always potentially fall back on survival. (145, my emphasis)

On this fundamental inequality revealed by liveability, let me add what transformation this important book made on my own perspective, the 'political' effect of this insurrection on a simple reader. The revolution brought about by Butler's thought, so composite, so profound, so timely, that Zaharijevic gives us, adamantly, in this beautiful, comprehensive reading, consists of the perspective that Butler composes enabling us to unmoor, to unanchor, subjectivity from every projection and cultural construct. From my perspective, a new path in Western philosophy is now being undertaken; a genesis of different compositions is possible. In the case of gender, it is clear, as it is with the relationship violence-sacredness (we should say nonviolence-sacredness of life), in the relationship psychic life-power. We could now further this unmooring by bringing it onto the money-form. Today, more and more, that unity of the subject that is born from the first metaphysical thought, from understanding the cosmos under a universal abstract notion of the One, from the birth of the psyche as a 'single and universal possession'—in other words, the concept of the subject as the apprehension of a universality/abstraction with a single, doomed consequence, the fall of individuation—well, that unity, needs to be undone in the mystification that these value-crafters operate: the more money one has, the more abstract, crystallized and regulated the subject *acomes*⁶ (identification with money—as, with Butler, there is identification with gender: social or cultural effect of a natural cause; and what is more socially constructed than money, which is 'the' construction of and for the social?), the more 'metaphysically' unknowable, unrelated, its hold on the world, the more power keeps on crafting

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violable, unintelligible to themselves, marginalized lives. That unity, so exhausted, so betrayed because imprisoned, so annihilated from within, finds in Butler's work the lever for liberation.

But how do we know and recognize this insurrection?

Philosophically: producing our own life—being caused by others, corresponds to the *openness of the self*, i.e., our substance, what 'stays' with us; our singular life until death is moving, changing, transforming over time and space, and, mainly, it does so because it is constitutively composed by the other, by a self-cohabiting (space), by an I constantly changing (over time), by an unknown-ness (-ability). The Aristotelian substance (*energeia-dynamis*) is overcome, the Spinozian substance is delved into, gone inside, and Foucault's 'thought of the outside' becomes here a 'praxis of the outside'. The subject is **relational**, and **interdependent**; there is no longer a 'solitary', separated, substance/being:

To persist in one's being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one's own [...] Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's 'own' being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. (Butler 1997b, 28)

Our own political *causa sui* is made by persisting in alterity, by striving to persevere, we could say, in building *conatuses* through a politics of love. Political love is the ultimate tool to transform the real according to the *potentia* of all, to the all -abilities that *potentia* can become:

If I am not the only one to demand this, if we are rising up together, it may lead to the expansion of the space of the real. Importantly, any such expansion testifies to the mutability of the limits of the real, to their expandability, transforming also the zone of possibility. We can say that all existing rights are recognised possibilities that, once recognised, transform the register through which the real gets established as the only possible one. (Zaharijevic, 149)

Our task is to sieve the places of 'impossibilities' and articulate the insurrections of ontology:

The stateless are not just stripped of status but accorded a status and prepared for their dispossession and displacement; they become stateless precisely through complying with certain normative categories. As such, they are produced as the stateless at the same time that they are jettisoned from juridical modes of belonging [...] they are, significantly, contained within the polis as its interiorized outside." (Butler 1997b, 15–6, my emphasis)

How do 'we' articulate an insurrection of ontology?

An **insurrection at the level of ontology** leads us to question what is real, whose lives are real and whose derealised, and whether violence takes place due to that unreality. But, importantly, it also urges us to think how reality might be remade (Butler 1997b, 33). This remaking has as its goal a reality that will ac-

commodate more real lives, and less violence that circumscribes the real. (Zaharijevic 189, my emphasis)

How can reality be remade?

What if political movements were forged from all those who fear discrimination and violence in public and private spaces, who demand to live and love freely without fear of violence? Perhaps then the “fear of destruction” could be identified in way that shows how its fascist exploitation is so egregiously wrong. (Butler 2024, 1)

We are indeed facing a ‘Butlerian revolution,’ as if the limits of knowledge of Kant, the Hegelian alienation (never conjoining of I/Other), the Foucauldian ‘biopower’ would all become here *in chiaro* and Butler would illuminate a dark spot which is the one that comes to be violated. This blind spot is the vulnerability seen by the one who can hurt you. Alienation is this vulnerability violated, the concrete shadow inserted in us by violence—between us and ourselves—that makes of us our own phantasms, separating desire from capacity, making us impotent of our own selves. And more: the dark spot, illuminated, speaks of the radical commonality of our being, which is of the same breath as the ancient Greek philosophies.

Let us read some further passages:

that **‘the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life, since what ever sense “our” life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world’** (Butler 2015b, 108). The avowal of interdependency rests upon a demand for social relation that is not based on destruction and eradication. It is, in other words, a demand for a liveable world. (Zaharijevic, 211)

The unmooring of the I from any possession—of the other, of the I itself—rests upon the knowledge that the I is constituted by the many others that each life becomes in its duration. I them. To acknowledge this constitutive relation is the ever-renewed act of political love:

The only true counterpoint to annihilation is the transformation of the social relation that rests upon this false dichotomy. Transformation relies on the avowal of two very basic assumptions: that we acknowledge our reciprocal destructiveness; and that we acknowledge that an endless, indeterminable eradication (until death or in life) annihilates not only particular lives, but also the relation between them. If eradication and domination are not the only possibilities the constitutive relationality offers—as they both, in the final instance, annihilate it—**what remains is the acknowledgement of the relation existing between my life and the life of another.** Recognition of the interdependent bond is not a philosophical or a poetic embellishment of an ugly world, but a

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formidable and binding ethico-political demand that obligates us to safeguard the relation on which our lives depend (Butler 2019b). (Zaharijevic, 212 my emphasis)

Politically, this is key:

the **endeavour to preserve the life of the other is something broader than the striving to survive and persist in my own self-subsistence. The endeavour to survive becomes equal to the endeavour to preserve a relation that constitutes me**, 'because who "I" am is nothing without your life, and life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations to others' (Butler 2009, 44). (212, my emphasis)

Zaharijevic continues:

For this reason, the politics of interdependence assumes a rejection not only of *militarism*, but also of *nationalism* and *racism*, as they depend on a 'racial schema', a frame or norm that produces some lives as already *ungrievable*, 'snuffed out, because, from the start, such a life did not register as a life, a life worth safeguarding' (Butler 2020, 121). (214, my italics)

And further:

Politics of interdependency stands against political formations that justify and promote the unequal distribution of vulnerability. [...] Finally, the politics of interdependency takes stock of the damaged life, a life without a sense of futurity. In this era of accelerating inequality, there is an obligation to **struggle against precarity, against acclimatising whole populations to insecurity, which is today the commonest form of abuse of our precariousness**. (214, my emphasis)

So, we can define Butler's revolution according to these tensor lines:

Insurrection at the level of ontology. It goes further than Foucault's bio-power because it presupposes: 1) acknowledgment of vulnerability and interdependency; 2) acknowledgement that *causa sui*, the cause of itself, is, in fact, a *causa ab alio*, me caused by you (I without you, me without us, is nothing but a vestige of the self; the subject is the multitude); 3) once disposed that life ('onto' of ontology) is this interwoven (unavoidable) texture of bodies-minds-me-you and that this texture, exactly because it is a continuous trespassing of thresholds/laws, is also vulnerable (pierceable out-in), interdependent (linked in-out), variable (transforming in time), potential (desiring/striving to become), common (my persistence cannot prescind from ours). Since our life-being is all this, insurrection cannot but be at the level of this structure of vulnerability, interdependence, multitudinarity, potentiality, commonality, over-thresholds (or, threshold/laws-trespassing).

Ethico-politics of interdependency: there is the ethico-political stance of a subject no longer a subject but a living being, relational, interdependent.

Domination/alienation are transformed into **vulnerability**, the detection/acknowledgment of the limits imposed by an ‘ordering nature’ and transformation of them into alternative ‘possibilities.’

Fascist passions: inadequate knowledge and causes, should be transformed into activist affects.

Nonviolence as an active form of perseverance in cohabitation and a breaking through (the norms), “endowed with an insurrectionary force,” that “produces the new;” it is a messianic action (I would say). Zaharijevic says:

Insurrection at the level of ontology does not entail stepping outside the real; rather, it means saying no to such reality, taking leave of it, yet without searching for some new, non-place reality, for some *utopos*. Quite the contrary, insurrection requires us to stay in what is our only real place, into which we have been thrown in a plural, unchosen way. Since ‘our’ place makes many of us unreal, the insurrection says ‘no’ to derealisation and ascription of layers of reality that allow expendable and ungrivable lives to exist. **To rebel means to desire and will a place in ‘our real’ where no lives are unreal; it means to demand that here, in the midst of the relation between the body and the world, there can be no lives whose reality is violently abolished.** The insurrection at the level of ontology is a demand for our place without the violence that renders some lives unreal. In the last instance, the insurrection at the level of ontology is an insurrection against violence committed against anyone who is part of this, our ‘ownly’ world. (223-4, my emphasis)

Conclusion

In “Fascist passions,” one of the most beautiful talks of our time, Butler said:

Today a self-righteous passion ... accompanies the decision to let migrants die at sea or perhaps a religious excitement of stripping people of their fundamental rights ... an excited fascism that takes hold and makes itself known when parenting right are denied to gay and lesbian people...

I would add: when an entire population is exterminated, when access to life-saving medical treatment is refused because of nonviolent activities, when the same life-saving medical treatment depends on huge amounts of money, when demonstrating students, citizens, are hit, wounded and arrested, when the right to abortion is threatened and suspended, when true knowledge is mystified, when nationhood values more than humanity, when more than 5 million people (only in Italy) live in absolute poverty, and it is declared that we are better off than before...

Fascism, as Italy knows, starts as a trend, as a potential [...] It is our obligation of critics to find and oppose this potential before it saturates society and state structure [...] *The only way forward is for all the targeted to gather themselves more effectively than their enemies* [...] *And fight the phantasms with a powerful and regenerative counter-imaginary* [...] *Freedom makes no sense when it fails to be collective* [...] No matter how difficult staying in emancipatory collectives may be, it is imperative in order both to acknowledge our differences, some of them irresolvable, as we seek

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to build the world that affirms the equal value of our loves and our losses. (Butler, 2024, my emphasis)

Foucault, in the introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, writes:

Last but not least, the major enemy, the strategic adversary, is fascism [...]. And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but **also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.**

[...] *Anti-Oedipus* is an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life*. This art of living counter to all forms of fascism [...]

- Develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization.

- Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems. Believe that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.

- **Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable.** It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses **revolutionary force.** (1972, xiii-xiv, my emphasis)

I think we could apply Butler's revolution (one aspect for all: alienation–vulnerability) to the presupposed relation that Power and Capital force on us, making us infinitely poor. Only by starting over with this insurrection at the level of ontology, fascist passions could undo themselves and overturn into activist affects.

Aren't we endowed with a revolutionary force?

In loving memory of Jawad Zawahra and his dream of nonviolent revolution for a liberated Palestine

Biography

Margherita Pascucci, PhD (2003), has published six monographs, including *Philosophical Readings of Shakespeare: "Thou Art the Thing Itself"* (Palgrave, 2013); *Macchina Capitale. Genesi e struttura dello sfruttamento* (Ombre Corte, 2022); *Causa sui. Saggio sul capitale e il virtuale* (Ombre Corte, 2009); *Potenza della povertà. Marx legge Spinoza* (Ombre Corte, 2006), foreword by Antonio Negri; translated in Persian by Foad Habibi (Qoqnoos, 2019); in English *Potentia of Poverty: Marx*

Reads Spinoza (Historical Materialism Book Series, Brill, 2023); *Il tempo tessuto di Dio. Ritratto filosofico immaginario di Dacia Maraini in vari atti* (il ramo e la foglia edizioni, 2021); *Il pensiero di Walter Benjamin. Un'introduzione*, foreword by Ubaldo Fadini (Il Parnaso, 2002), and a little book of poetry, *Solidago virga aurea* (Bruno Alpini, 2023).

Notes

1. We had occasion to discuss the book, together with Adriana Zaharijevic, Massimo Palma and Daniela Chironi, at a seminar hosted by COSMOS, Scuola Normale di Pisa, Florence, May 2024.
2. See Zaharijevic 84, note 4: “being/becoming; being/acting; essence/existence; thing in itself/phenomenon; essence/appearance.”
3. “‘Can the “Other” of Philosophy Speak?’, the final chapter of *Undoing Gender*, itself a peculiar trajectory of reading practices, gives Spinoza a seemingly strangely prominent position in Butler’s personal history of philosophy. She describes the *Ethics* as her first, autodidactic and ‘premature’ encounter with philosophical thought, and the idea that a primary human passion is to persist (2004b 235)” (Zaharijevic, 145).
4. See 70ff.
5. See Zaharijevic at the important pages 77-8: “Being unintelligible means being deprived of the resources that can be life sustaining. It means being exposed to violence (more) and barred from equality in a more profound sense, as someone who lives, but not quite equally to others; as someone who is real, but not entirely thinkable in reality mottled with shadowy regions. Embodying the norm *improperly* leads to various kinds of derealisation and dehumanisation. Embodying the norm *improperly* amounts to becoming (gendered as) monstrous, ‘unthinkable, abject, unlivable’, not mattering in the same way” (Butler 2007b: x).
6. We could coin this word: to *acome*, not to become. The *adynamia* which blocks the becoming.

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