Seminar on Judith Butler's
"Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly"

"Lots of consequential movements have started
in small rooms in hostile environments."

The seminar "Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*"
was held in Belgrade on November 21st, 2015. The texts assembled in this
thematic block are the contributions of researchers who kindly answered
the call to join the conversation about this book. The order of presentations
respected improvised thematic units. The printed transcription of Judith
Butler's answers and comments followed the edited and elaborated contri-
butions of each participant, complemented by their lists of references. Some
chose to submit their original texts, prepared for the occasion, while others
were subsequently inspired by the seminar, evoking what they heard and
read in the meantime.

53

Sanja Milutinović Bojanić

(CAS SEE, University of Rijeka)
sanja.bojanic@uniri.hr

> Nothing less than those evils, which threaten the whole species, can disturb
> the calm sleep of the philosopher, and force him from his bed. One man
> may with impunity murder another under his windows; he has nothing to
> do but clap his hands to his ears, argue a little with himself to hinder
> nature, that startles within him, from identifying him with the unhappy
> sufferer. Savage man wants this admirable talent; and for want of wisdom
> and reason, is always ready foolishly to obey the first whispers of humanity.
> In riots and street-brawls the populace flock together, the prudent man
> sneaks off. They are the dregs of the people, the poor basket and barrow-
> women that part the combatants, and hinder gentle folks from cutting one
> another's throats. (Rousseau, 1994: 112)

Rousseau's words from *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of
the Inequality Among Mankind* ring out forcefully and passionately in their
political incorrectness. What mob, what rabble and barrow-women could
react more authentically than the prudent man in preventing a massacre?
Who would even be the "prudent men" of our times? Would they not be
those Judith Butler calls "discursive strategists" (Butler 2015: 3) who rely
on modes of public discourse, marketing, and propaganda to decide the
question of which states and which popular movements will or will not be
called democratic? It is not that the masses are less prone to violence, nor
are they free of seeking conflict, yet street clashes and fights remain con-
fined to crime pages of dailies and obscure histories, their larger impact
blunted. In contrast, the epidemic of violent and cunning strategies aiming

to suffocate struggles against inequality is on the rise, its pathways and driving forces difficult to map out, pinpoint and contain. Sleeping uneasily, Butler has been on the road nearly five years – beginning around the time of the *Tahrir Square* events, having participated in *Occupy Wall Street* and the gatherings at *Zuccotti Park*, but also in the *West Bank* where she led a seminar at *Bir Zeit University* and visited a theater in *Jenin*, to *Black Lives Matter* and *Gezi Park protests* – noting reasons, posing questions and negotiating, putting up signposts and methods that could potentially describe or sketch out reasons that justify not only the purpose of public assembly that signifies resistance to inequality (and is this not Rousseau's motive?), but also its place and function in society at large.

Did you notice the interloper there? What is theory doing, what the philosopher? And how can we articulate something that Judith Butler in this book names "a performativity of assembly"? What is the context of creation of public assemblies? How are they put into action? How is the assembly of a people (of the ninety-nine percent) arranged, realized and executed (all words under the umbrella of the performative)? Who are the people and how is their will expressed? Are we speaking the language of *demos* and democracy? What are modalities of public discourses and how is the demarcation line of a people drawn? Before embarking on her argument and gradually expanding her premises, Butler writes: "Groups suddenly coming together in large numbers can be a source of hope as well as fear, and just as there are always good reasons to fear the dangers of mob action, there are good grounds for discerning political potential in unpredictable assemblies." (Butler 2015:1) It is difficult to count a group, yet it is extremely important to collect it, call it together, despite the various denominators of belonging (whether geographic or linguistic), bring them together into infrastructures whose public use could guarantee equal rights of expression to all.

The first chapters of the book focus on the distinction among kinds and forms of assembly that could carry clear political content. Judith Butler notes the disagreement between the political forms of democracy and the principle of popular sovereignty. Thus Rousseau's *first whispers of humanity* can be detected in the bodies mobilized in spaces where, exposed and laid open, they become clearly vulnerable and precarious. Hence Butler writes: "When bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones), they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity" (Butler 2015: 11). We might recognize such forms of togetherness as being in the state of becoming and potential forms of popular sovereignty. However,

is any action of the people "democracy in action?" When squares, streets, devastated portions of cities, phantom neighborhoods and occupied territories experience the mobilization of the vulnerable and exposed, do these forms of assembly carry within themselves those "fugitive" moments of democracy that on so many occasions Jacques Derrida too named always and ever in the future momentum as *démocratie à venir*? Indeed, fugitive moments of democracy are not only transient, since, in the words of Sheldon Wolin, "democracy is not about where the political is located but how it is experienced" (Wolin 1994: 18). The singular experience of fracture and partialness, insufficiency and incompleteness, are manifestations of a bad world in which there is no room for content of spontaneously changing experience. Such a world necessitates change, because as Butler suggests, following Adorno, it is not possible to live the "good life" in a bad world, and the imperative ought to be leading a social life "implicating us in a larger social, economic, and infrastructural world that exceeds our perspective and the situated, first-person modality of ethical questioning." Butler's book indeed comprises published notes, and not ready made answers; yet in moving *towards a performative theory of assembly,* the author is certainly not discouraged by the insufficient vulnerability of ones or the ignorance of precarity of the others.

By briefly looking at the last paragraph from the introduction of the book, I would like to draw attention to one such "note." Namely, the constructive concern that groups of people assembling in large numbers could be both "a source of hope as well as fear" is precisely the introductory oxymoron with which the book strengthens its argumentation, while at the same time marking the rhythm in which it builds its sturdy construction. Certainly it is a question of measure – measure of vulnerability or precarity that ought to alternate and be spread out so that it awakens vulnerability in the intransigently strong, yet be a source of strength for the endlessly weak. It ought to represent what Butler describes as the "paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful." Flights of hope necessarily replace picks of fear and anxiety, alternating the paradoxical condition of action:

> Indeed, the very conception of human action as pervasively conditioned implies that when we ask the basic ethical and political question, how ought I to act, we implicitly reference the conditions of the world that make that act possible or, as is increasingly the case under conditions of precarity, that undermine the conditions of acting. What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away? Such an impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful, a gathering enacted by bodies under duress or in the name of duress, where the gathering itself signifies persistence and resistance. (Butler 2015: 23)

55

Judith Butler

Introductory remarks

First of all, at the very outset, I would like to thank all the people who have worked so hard not only to put this wonderful conference together, but to make this visit so smooth and interesting and productive for me. So, I really thank you all. If I might just say one more thing, I left last night realizing that I have not answered Ksenija's question about reason, feeling, male and female, active and passive, how to think those dualities in relation to one another. If I may just take a moment to do that, I would feel better and perhaps Ksenija, if you are there, you will feel better, too.[1]

I think one of the great contributions of feminist philosophy has been to call into question those polarities between reason and feeling, male and female, active and passive, and to show that they also tend to hierarchize the binary relations that they install. And, of course we are always in a bind once we have shown that reason is understood to master feeling or should master feeling, just as male should subordinate female, just as activity should subordinate passivity. We are always in a bind because the easiest strategy is simply to reverse the value given to the dyad and assert the superiority of the female, the feeling and the passive. Now, the problem with that gesture is really obvious, (there are, after all, many so-called women who are not going to like that particular identification), and there is a tendency to believe that there are still these discrete, polar opposite differences between the sexes, rather than to explore the complex continuum that gender is. You will note that gender, for me, enters at this moment when the dimorphic imaginary of sex is contested. When writing this book on assembly, I was most interested in rethinking the difference between passivity and activity in light of the problem – and it is a political problem – of how and when do people take action, gather or become assembled. It is usually in the midst of conditions in which they are undergoing something that they did not choose, and which undermines their capacity to choose. They are suffering, there is a passive suffering of a condition that is not chosen, and yet there is an action that is not just my action or your action, but an acting together in the now, right? We are coordinating what is going

---

1   Ksenija Forca (Feminist and queer activist, Belgrade) posed the last question during the previous night discussion, after the lecture "Vulnerability/Resistance". Her question concerned an analysis of interconnections between binary dichotomies such as masculinity/femininity, irrational/rational, vulnerability/ resistance, active/passive etc. In patriarchal (mainstream) discourse and normative societies, femininity, passivity, irrationality and vulnerability are considered worthless and undesirable in constituting any (political) subject. Since Judith Butler wrote about these dichotomies and interconnections in her previous work, it would be interesting to see such an analysis, given the topic of the book and her lecture in Belgrade.

to happen even though coordination is not mastery or prediction, so we do not know precisely what is going to happen.

One of the questions I am trying to think about is: how do we move beyond the temptation to cling to the polar opposite of the passive, the receptive or the responsive. When we talk about responsiveness – is that passive, is that active, is that exactly both – a mode of being affected and moving toward what affects us? Is that a term – responsiveness – that defies the binary opposition itself? Responsive is already alive, animated, moving in the direction toward something else, but also affected by something exterior. It is not a passive standstill, it is not a pure being-acted-on. It is being acted on and being animated by virtue of being acted on in a certain way. And that being or becoming animated, which could bring us into all kinds of philosophical discussions about Spinoza, for instance, strikes me as the in-between of the active and passive, or calls for a different kind of configuration that moves us beyond the opposition itself. And I think that this moving beyond the strict polarity of active and passive is true about gender performativity. You could say that the theory of gender performativity bears both conventional masculine and feminine qualities and even enacts the critique of the binary. In other words, if I am being acted upon but also acting, am I being active or passive, or in-between, or am I in a historical process that involves all kinds of combination? Norms act on us, but one way that they act is by shaping the form of our response and appropriation to them. That response and appropriation also has the power to reshape that norm, or those norms – the ones we never chose. So I guess my interest is not to trans-valuate the binary but to move us through it, to show us another kind of possibility outside of hierarchy and binary opposition.

Jelena Vasiljević
(IFDT, University of Belgrade)
jvasiljevic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

Vulnerability, infrastructure, and (non)violence: preliminary thoughts on Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*

Judith Butler's latest book is a profoundly engaging read, tackling many contemporary burning issues through highly dense theoretical considerations. Many of its passages made me embark on different and often mutually unrelated chains of thoughts and associations, but here I will try to single out three themes for reflection and to establish some connections between them.

One theme that kept emerging as a thread connecting different chapters, which I find impossible to ignore, not only in the context of its presence in

57

the book, but due to its importance for reflecting our contemporary condition more generally, is vulnerability. Even though the book offers many important insights into the conditions generating *unequal* distribution of precarity and vulnerability – or maybe precisely because it does so – I could not help but think of an opposite process actually taking place: the one of the relatively *even* distribution of vulnerability we are starting to experience today. Maybe we could claim that this is precisely the reason (or at least one of the reasons) vulnerability has become such a widespread notion and framework for thinking our present political and social conditions. In my mind this leads to a rather pessimistic view: namely, we are overwhelmingly stressing the precarious conditions of our modern lives because of a certain *randomness of precarity*, which hitherto has not been its defining feature. Certain *equilibrium* of the conditions generating vulnerability – modern history has made us used to relating vulnerability to certain social classes, ethnic and minority groups, or regions in the world ("destined" to be politically and socially unstable) – has collapsed with neoliberalism and geographical and social distribution of vulnerability has become less predictable. And we can already see the confusion this insight is creating – just think of some of the reactions to paralysis we could find on social media after the recent attacks in Paris that went along the lines of "why don't you mourn Beirut bodies the same way you mourn Paris bodies." Of course this issue is immensely complex, polarizing and certainly deserving of a much more serious approach. But the point is this: we are moving towards becoming relatively equally vulnerable – exposed to uncertainties and *failing infrastructures*; or at least previously *reliable* geographical and social containers of vulnerability no longer work (bodies in Paris can be vulnerable just like bodies in Beirut; bodies of adjunct professors are becoming vulnerable just like the bodies of construction workers). Pessimism comes from this insight: we are resenting not precarity as such, but the fact that it no longer resides in *predictable* places, that it could affect anyone, *even us*. This idea should urge us to reconsider our deeply embedded hierarchical visions of humanity.

Another matter I want to briefly turn to is already mentioned – *infrastructure*. Even though we are usually lamenting its steady decline and the loss of its supportive functions (which we are right to do) – precisely rendering us more vulnerable – here I want to remind of its totality, namely to underline that infrastructure supports inequalities and distribution of vulnerability as well. Many passages in the book indicate precisely this point: the non-prepolitical nature of infrastructure, the way very conditions enabling political enactment are political themselves. Infrastructure in not un-biased, it is not neutral – it does not only safeguard us against precarity but simultaneously (re)produces precarious and vulnerable bodies. (As vulnerability stems from relationality; relations are constituted within socio-material contexts [call them cultures, societies, groups…]; contexts are only played out through concrete infrastructures…).

58

So, finally, for me, the most important question is how to non-ambivalently connect and relate to one another: infrastructure, *livable life* and non-violence (as livable life is another important thread in Butler's book; an ideal and a norm that has to depend on supportive infrastructure and on the absence of violence). To this we must answer: what is a livable life? It has to be saturated with norms, but whose norms? It has to be supported by infrastructure, which has to be non-exclusive – even though, as it was mentioned, infrastructure is political; and does the non-exclusionary political exist?

At the very end, to summarize my thoughts on these matters and worries they incite, let me ask another question seemingly unrelated to previous concerns: is the life of an untouchable (a Dalit) a livable life? If not, by whose standards? The question is not random, as the train of thoughts that led me here included the figure of Gandhi (being emblematic in the context of Butler's book because of the argument of non-violence as action), his opposition to Ambedkar regarding the latter's fight for the abolition of casts, and possible *translation* (in terms of the Butler's book) of Gandhi's response to him: the abolition of casts would destroy the *infrastructure* of the Indian society, and that would incite *violence*.

This historical vignette is invoked as a reminder for all our present and future theoretical efforts to preserve and establish infrastructure for enabling livable lives and fighting violence: an argument was raised in the name of preventing violence and preserving infrastructure (by a figure who gave non-violence his name) to maintain one of the most violent systems of human relations this world has ever known.

Éric Fassin

(University of Paris 8, LEGS-CNRS, Paris)
eric.fassin@legs.cnrs.fr

It is a pleasure to have one more chance to speak here in Belgrade, all lined up for discussion. Not only am I delighted to have yet another opportunity to engage Judith Butler's work, but I am also fascinated by this *dispositif* which reminds me of the pictures of Tito that we glanced at as we made our way through the building to this event: indeed, this looks like an intellectual version of the Politburo… though I must add that, in this case, I am not worried: our judgment on Butler's new book will be unanimously positive. In order to express my gratitude to the organizers, I shall be brief.

Let me start with a famous scene from the French Revolution, which may truly be called its foundational moment. In 1789, representatives of the Estates-General met in a hall, the *Jeu de Paume*; but they were trapped. The King's men wanted to force them out. Mirabeau's refusal to have their group disbanded before they could draft a constitution transformed their resistance

59

into a historical gesture that shook monarchy and inaugurated a democratic era: "Go tell your master the King that we are here by the will of the people, and that we shall be removed only at the point of bayonets." This became an oath soon to be immortalized in heroic form in an unfinished painting by David.

What I want to point out is that this scene conflates two different meanings of the French phrase "espace publique." On the one hand, there is the public sphere: these men claim to speak as representatives of the nation as they recreated themselves as a National Assembly. On the other hand, there is a private space (a "jeu de paume", that is the king's tennis court) that becomes a public one (the "Jeu de Paume" becoming the house of the people).

My question is: how are the two meanings, the abstract space of representation, and the concrete space of location, related in your work? Are the metaphorical and the physical meanings conflated, or separate? How are they articulated? In order to illustrate my question, let me take two examples that I have encountered in my sociological work in the French context.

One is that of prostitution, or sex-work. The politics of this polemic, at least in France, focus on public spaces, if not public squares. The issue is visibility. No one is claiming to fight against sex work that takes place in private spaces, either in homes or businesses; the problem is street prostitution – and in particular the fact that these women congregate publicly in order to avoid the perils of isolation (men are left out of the discussion). In the public sphere, the whole heated debate turns around public spaces. At the same time, these "femmes publiques" (the old word) do not have a voice in the public sphere. They are spoken of; but they are never heard. Their physical assembly does not give them a representative presence.

The second example is that of the so-called Islamic veil. It is also a question of visibility in more ways than one. First, women wearing a veil are accused of trying to escape visibility; public visibility is then understood as an essential component of democratic participation. The justifications for the 2010 law against the integral veil focused on this type of argument. But second, it is their visibility (as much as their invisibility) that is considered problematic: the 2004 law rejected "ostentatious" religious signs in schools. However, the meaning of "public" changed from 2004 to 2010, from public schools to public spaces: while girls leaving secular schools can put their veil back on, women wearing an integral veil have to take it off if they want to go into streets. But in both cases, just like sex workers, veiled women are spoken of, but not heard from in the public polemic that concerns them most.

So, again, is this distinction of any use in your own work? And if so, what is the work that this distinction can do for the purposes of "a performative theory of assembly"?

60

Daša Duhaček

(Faculty of Political Sciences, Center for Gender and Politics, University of Belgrade)gordana.
duhacek@fpn.bg.ac.rs

Judging (for) the assembly: a commentary on Judith Butler,
Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly

Judith Butler's recent book, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* opens up myriad important questions. This short commentary will focus on the possibility of – once again – using Arendt and feminist interpretations of her theory. I will resist the temptation to go into any of the other directions – such as exploring gender which is, in this book, an excellent summation of a long-term engagement Butler has invested in tackling gender trouble/s (Butler 1990, Butler 2004). The tone of this book may come across as "resisting," or "refusing" Arendt and, in each particular argument, quite rightly so (Butler 2015: 60, 75). However, I think there are some possibilities in the way Arendt's political theory may still be further explored; and these possibilities are very much in the context of the questions raised here.

One of the points of departure in the book may be called "responsibilization" wrestled from under "neoliberalism, and renewed versions of political and economic individualism" (Butler 2015:14-15). The category of responsibility is also Arendt's focus, addressed as personal responsibility (Arendt 2003), but also, significantly, as *collective* responsibility (Arendt 2003), which in her theory has become an emphatically political category. This concept of collective responsibility in Arendt's theory corresponds to Butler's focus on acting *in concert*, or *plural* performativity, etc.

Action in Arendt's theory is a privileged category, however performed only in public, and, as Butler reminds us often, notoriously absent from the private sphere (Butler 2015: 44). Even if the issue has to some extent been resolved (Honig 1992) it is always important to address it, especially concerning the legitimate proposal of bridging this gap between private and public, important for feminist political theory (Butler 2015: 76).

Butler mentions other gaps/binaries, considering them to be sharply divisive and hence problematic if transposed from Arendt's political theory and deployed, as such, in contemporary issues of building the concept of the political, notably the "distinction between body and mind" (Butler 2015: 45), or the problem of separating (the life of) the body from the life of the mind (Butler 2015: 203, 205) or, in Arendt's terms, thinking from acting. Butler resolves the public /private gap picturesquely naming it as a "passage from private to public" by arguing that "the public is essentially dependent on the private" (Butler 2015: 205). Moreover, she convincingly claims that the "private is not opposed to the political, but enters into its very definition

(…) private sphere becomes the very background of public action." (Butler 2015: 205). However, the other binary – mind versus body – equally critical for the political, can benefit from further deploying Arendt's theory.

In that context, my question concerns the possibility of using the Arendtian approach to judgment as a possible link to bridging the above mentioned gap (notwithstanding some of the arguments to the contrary, see Villa 1999). By focusing on the body (and juxtaposing it to the Arendtian concept of the mind), Butler appears to highlight this as a critical opposition. On the other hand, while the Arendtian body is laboring, working and finally, according to Butler, also acting politically (Arendt, 1958), it should be noted that the Arendtian mind is thinking, willing and ultimately judging (Arendt 1977).[2] As is well known, it is the category of judgment which, albeit not finally explicated in Arendt's theory, is designated as an eminently political category (Arendt 1989). Consequently, it is my argument that Butler's analysis of the acting in concert, renewed in her interpretation of responsibilization, can benefit from an expansion into the inquiry of judgment.

Butler already addressed the problem of judgment in some of her previous work (Butler 2012), but the category of judgment in the text *Parting Ways* is understood as a result, the aim of a process. Judgment is addressed within Levinas' and Benjamin's concept of judgment and, of course refers to Kantian aesthetic judgment. However, there are some restrictions in presenting this concept since here it pertains to the judgment as a court decision (Butler 2012: 132) or, the "final judgment", even the "Last Judgement" (Butler, 2012:95). As significant as these points in understanding judgment are, it is Butler's study of the assembly where judgment, as a bounded concept, will not suffice and cannot be productively analyzed as finite. The many guises of assembly that Butler considers, such as protests, gatherings, vigils, even funerals, where concerted action is taking place, are forms of political engagement which require the analysis of the processes of judging. Perhaps, these dynamics can then contribute even to redefining the concept of the political. On the other hand, as noted, Arendt has indicated and opened up the issue of judgment. Without going into the countless interpretations of the category of judgment which dovetailed the original unfulfilled promise of the last part of *The Life of the Mind* (e.g. Beiner 1989) let us place it on the theoretical and political agenda once again.

Here is where Linda Zerilli has seriously moved the debate forward which is why her analyses are relevant in feminist theory (Zerilli 2005, Zerilli 2009, Zerilli 2011). Devoting a series of texts to unfolding the category of judgment,

62

2   Arendt's last work, *Life of the Mind* consists of two parts, Thinking and Willing. The third part was to be on Judging, but it was never written. Arendt, Hannah (1977) *Life of the Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.

she clarifies relevant issues (plurality, validity, imagination, etc.). Contrary to the prevailing interpretations of judgment, which perceive it as a cognitive closure, Linda Zerilli explicates why validity, as an epistemological criterion, cannot be the only politically relevant parameter. Therefore, in the matters of assembly or concerted action the ramifications of judgment regarding sustaining plurality, or building a community become evident since "the practice of political judgment is a way of constructing or discovering community through articulation of individuality…for this articulation will always involve taking the perspective of others into account." (Zerilli 2005: 159). However, it must also be taken into account that "[j]udgment is a way of constructing and discovering (the *limits* of) community," (Ibid. emphasis added) and, we may add, judging becomes irreplaceable in negotiating most issues of acceptance and inclusion into the public sphere. When claiming that "to be precluded from the space of appearance..." Butler also notes this is an exclusion from plurality (Butler 2015: 59). And plurality is the condition of (political) action – "the *conditio per quam* – of all political life" (Arendt 1958: 7). This again calls for the analysis predicated on the category of judgment. Just to illustrate some of the complexities which may need to be addressed in this context, for example, Butler asks: "[t]he sphere of politics …is one in which there are always more than two subjects at play on the scene. (…) To which Other do I respond ethically? Which Other do I put before myself? Or do I stand by?" (Butler 2004: 139-140)

63

To return to the gap which Butler underscores in Arendt's political theory, namely the one between the body and the mind. Zerilli appears to resolve the problem by privileging the position of the spectator in the ongoing debate: actor *versus* spectator. Spectator "sees the play as a whole." More importantly, Zerilli draws attention to what Arendt clarifies as a politically pivotal position: "the judgment of the spectator *creates the space* …the public realm" which is "constituted by the spectators, not by actors" (Arendt 1989: 63). But, she expands and clarifies her claim, "this spectator sits in every actor" (Ibid.). Linda Zerilli highlights the significance of this positioning of the actor and the spectator. "This shift in emphasis amounts to a Copernican turn in the relationship of action to judgment: without the judging spectators…action would have no meaning…" Judgment is the faculty which "allows us to order or make sense of our experience (…) gives coherence and meaning" (Zerilli 2005: 160). Nonetheless, questions regarding interpretations of judgment do remain.

In order to underscore this, the claim that the point is in securing the conditions of the process rather than aiming for the result as the criterion "Arendt emphasizes judging as an activity, not judgment as the result of an activity… What we affirm in a political judgment is experienced not as a cognitive commitment, but as pleasure, as shared sensitivity. 'We feel our freedom'

What gives us pleasure is how *we judge…in freedom*" (Zerilli 2005: 183). This is the process of construction, building the political community.

In her book on the *Performative Theory of Assembly* Butler develops a strong case in defense of the Arendtian argument of the *right to have rights*, which she translates into a current political issue of recognizing the urgency of the right to assembly and protest. This can further be unfolded in building a passage between spectator and actor, perhaps even discovering that there is no gap between mind and body – not even in Arendt's theory – just the unfolding of the complexities of judging processes. These intricacies can only multiply in all the pathways which lead from 'I' to 'we', and spill over into the public square of concerted political action.

Erzsébet Barát

(Department of English Studies, University of Szeged & Department
of Gender Studies, Central European University, Budapest)

For embedded distinctions of precarity and identity

For this round table, I have decided to reflect in detail on the first chapter of *Precarious Life,* as it is this chapter that speaks most to my scholarly field, namely social linguistics, and to my interest in studying the relationship between language use, power and ideology. In addition, this is the text I can contextualize in Judith Butler's works in queer theory that develop a discursive approach to gender, some of which I have translated into Hungarian. The chapter brings me closest to my interest in and concern about the validity of the category of 'identity' (Barát 2011, 2015). Therefore, I would like my contribution to focus on the differentiation that in my reading Judith Butler draws between a politics of precarity as something that is more promising for collective political acts of justice *vis-a-vis* identity politics.

In my understanding, Butler sets out to argue that on occasions of occupations of public spaces by bodies that are deemed disposable, people come together to demand a livable life and, as a corollary to that, a grievable death. They demand the very right to appear and thereby say 'We are still here.' They do not have on these occasions a list of specific demands concerning a particular vision of how to make their life more just, more livable because, I gather, such an articulation of actual demands would run the risk of engaging in identity politics. At the same time, there is also the assumption that making the precarity of life intelligible is not about willing away our ontological vulnerability to others but about making precarity function as a site of intervention to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action, while identity is seen as an inherently normative and normalizing category of (legitimization of) exclusion. Precarity would allow for a broader, by

implication non-exclusionary, understanding of 'demands'. However, it is not so much a matter of scale as the reference to a broader/narrower scope should imply. This inclusiveness is made possible, paradoxically, by the fact that the category of precarity is conceptualized to allow for imagining *sharing the demand* of livable life in public spaces in the form of a political act of plural performativity. Sharing then comes to be precluded in the case of political acts by mobilizations around 'identity' that is said to operate through the production and maintenance of normative conceptions of belonging. To me, this distinction seems to produce a binary between a sharing that is associated with a universally imagined human condition over and against the articulations of particular demands. My reflections start precisely with how to understand this plurality as the condition of an inclusionary progressive political act that should not hinge on the viability of this binary divide. If we accept the ontological premise that utterances (for their intelligibility) are structured by plurality, or multiplicity, that is the meaning of any category, including identity as well as precarity, is by definition polyvocal or dialogic in Bakhtin's (1975/1982) sense of the term, then all categories are informed by this multiple logic. Plurality is integral to all categories as a logical contingency. Consequently, the identity of the 'I' or 'us' is always already called into question in and by its differential modes of relating to others. Then the task to address to me is not that much to argue that identity as a category should necessarily fail to furnish what it means to live and act ethically together while precarity could deliver this by way of its necessary orientation to inclusion but rather to explore the genealogy of the categories themselves; to see whether the current historic conditions of social struggle are more favorable towards an understanding of, or preference for, precarity over identity. Maybe, what we should study is the reasons for 'precarity' to seem more of a promising category in contemporary political thought. Is the concept of precarity more productive because it has not become sedimented in the same way or to the same level of 'obviousness' as 'identity' has either in academic or in non-academic discourses of progressive politics to evoke people as a group of belonging.

65

I believe seeing plurality as a structuring principle of all categories also entails the need to differentiate between arbitrariness and contingency, between the openness of a category as a matter of logical, epistemological likelihood and that of deontic binding of actual political relations of power that are to set a limit to the potential, logical plurality of signification. In my opinion, it is the paradigm of flexibility embedded within a particular political context of contingency that may explain why we should like to invest in the mobilizing potential of 'precarity' over 'identity' now and not some inherently understood exclusion/inclusion divide. I have come to this understanding on the basis of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*; more specifically its chapter entitled "Critically Queer." Her concern in that closing

chapter is with the temporality of the term. She sets out to explain the change of the meaning of the term from stigma to an affirmative set of meanings, from working as the mundane means of discursive regulation of the boundaries of legitimate sexuality to the successful resignification of desire as liminality (Butler 1993: 230).

In light of her argument there, I would say that our task is now to see whether we can argue for the need to overcome the constitutive history of injury articulated by interpellations through identity categories under the current particular conditions, such as the US practice of indefinite detentions in war camps. Our analyses then need to explore if and how identity indeed cannot be seen as a useful category of analysis for such political activism as 'precarity'; if that is the case because identity has been centralized too much, even in political movements that self-identity as progressive, to the point of articulating itself as "the obvious center" of political movements for social justice. Within such a historically contingent frame, we do not need to exclude 'identity' as inherently normative and take precarity as necessarily of more critical and organizing potential any longer. Even if what is at stake in contemporary political movements of occupation of public spaces is negotiating what counts as livable and grievable life, it is not obvious that it should be seen to be more effective through precarity because the latter is not a category that could yield an act of identification. As a linguist, I would say that within the contemporary political economy of signification, part of the attraction of precarity may lie with its more intensified orientation to encoding activities and so it can be more easily associated with transformation while identity is more readily anchored in nominalization and hence seen as oriented to static, non-dynamic states of being and hence to rigid dispositions in political negotiations. This orientation to nominalization can contribute to rendering 'identity' as if "the" category of mediating the meaning of autonomous sociality abstracted away from any actual performances of embodiment that are much more readily available for the grammatical categories of verbs that are associated with precarious embodiments.

Judith Butler

Responses to Jelena Vasiljević, Éric Fassin, Daša Duhaček, Erzsébet Barát

First of all, Jelena, I appreciated very much your remarks, they could in fact develop into enormously robust criticisms in time, so I hope you go on to read other books as well. Just kidding. There are many important issues here. I take it that the pessimistic view that you are offering is one that suspects that, in fact, precarity has become increasingly random and that it affects people in increasingly random ways that cannot be patterned and predictable. And you suggest that perhaps we are not living in a situation of an unequal

distribution of vulnerability, but we actually are experiencing randomly induced vulnerability or even an emerging homogenization of vulnerablity. So I would just say this: I think there is an interesting debate going on having to do with Thomas Piketty's work, suggesting that in fact we can chart and track accelerating inequalities at the economic level and that wealth is being accumulated by fewer and fewer people at a greater rate, and poverty is being expanded at an accelerated rate, and including more and more people. One question is this: for those who might understand themselves as middle-class, or who believed that going to school and getting a job might safeguard them from precarity, they are finding that the jobs they are getting are temporary or the debts they are accruing cannot be paid off even with a full salary. So, to be salaried is not enough to safeguard against the prospect of unpayable debt. I do not want to be too economistic about this – I am not an economistic mind – but I do think that the Piketty argument is an interesting one, because from the perspective of that group which is trying to ascend to the middle class, or which understands itself as functioning within the middle class presumption – only to find that they lost this job, or that that job does not work, or the salary is not ok, or I cannot get a house, or I cannot do anything that was part of the traditional promise of middle class employed life – from that group's perspective it does feel random, it can be registered as random. Why did I have this job and suddenly I do not? That is random. Why did I get this salary only to find that I cannot pay my rent with that salary? It is random at a certain level because patterns that we expect to replicate themselves are breaking down, but it may be that those random patterns can be thought about in terms of Piketty's understanding of economic inequality as an effect of randomness that actually belongs to this unfortunately patterned way in which economic inequality is increasing in an unfortunately predictable – not totally predictable, but trackable – way. (Jelena Vasiljević makes a short intervention to clarify her point)

67

Right. But would we not protest it if we saw it as not only unequally distributed but *increasingly* unequally distributed? In other words, I think there is an analysis that could perhaps produce a better informed protest. But thank you, I think this is really helpful to think about. I completely agree with you that infrastructure can support inequality. That was the problem with apartheid; it was the problem with slavery and the caste system, as you pointed out. And though I make use of Gandhi occasionally, I am not in any way committed to all of Gandhi's views. I do not accept his views on caste, I do not accept his views on women or, indeed, on passivity. No. So, if abolition of the caste system destroys the infrastructure, is that a bad thing? No, it strikes me as a revolution. And sometimes infrastructures need to be destroyed, or brought to a halt, in order for something revolutionary to take place. That is perhaps one of the key meanings of the general strike. Maybe the category that is missing from this book is revolution.

Eric, I appreciate very much your once again letting us imagine *L'Assemblée nationale* trapped in the Jeu de Paume. Really, amazing. Maybe we should make distinctions here in Arendt's work: *Espace publique*; the space of appearance and the space of politics. Of course, it becomes confusing because Arendt maintains a distinction between the private and the public and, at least in *The Human Condition*, it would seem that it is the public sphere which is the presumptive space of politics. And yet, as she describes the space of politics we realize that it is effectively disjoined from any particular architecture or infrastructure. It does not have to take place in the square, it does not have to be an already established public space. It actually comes into being wherever and whenever a group of people get together and act in concert. So that is the literal plural performativity of her view. We get together and act in concert, and we could be in the Jeu de Paume or we could be in a railway station, or we can be in a street or at the border, or any number of places. Insofar as we act together we produce a space of politics which rearticulates the public in a new way, outside of any established or recognizable public space. That seems interesting – of course, I love that idea of hers, it is beautiful, it is romantic, I wish it were true, and perhaps it is true in part, for we do not know in advance what will become a space of appearance. But in fact, I worry about her transcendence of the material conditions of acting, the question of support, the question of architecture and infrastructure. So that is where I try to re-ground her or at least point out that action always needs support. All action needs support, including plural action (plurality alone is not sufficient support). It does not need to be a recognized public space that would be the support – I think that would be a kind of Bourdieu argument, namely, that already existing convention alone supports effective action. But still, there must be some kind of structuring of space for that to take place even as it can be significantly restructured in and by the action.

The question you raise about "prostitution" is an interesting one. Should prostitutes – should sex workers, as some of us would prefer to call them – remain invisible, should they remain unrepresented, or should they be in fact visible, an acknowledged part of public life, and represented by unions and institutions that will make sure that they work safely and with proper pensions? I am in favor of that second view. I guess I wanted to point out that, at least in France, the question of what is permissible in a public space is confused, as you yourself pointed out with the wonderful example of the woman who leaves school without the niqab and then puts it on to go home and so loses respect and standing in the public sphere, since veiled women are not considered to be political subjects in their own right. I recently saw under conditions of *l'état d'urgence*, news programs were interviewing the neighbors in Saint-Denis where the most suicide bombing occurred and where those responsible for the attacks were living. And this woman (a neighbor) was in a full-face veil, and she was giving an interview on

the television show. And they wanted her information; they did not say you couldn't appear like this on a television show. And they did not presume she was, because veiled, utterly mute. They let her appear, perhaps by accident, she had a perfectly interesting set of remarks to make about the people who were living there and how much she did not like them. It caused a brief debate in public discourse: should she not have been interviewed? Should that face not have been broadcast? Well, she is a neighbor, she had things to say, and someone thought: let us forget about the niqab, let us hear what this woman has to say. I enjoyed that little transgression, it seemed there are many inconsistencies on how public space is regulated. Perhaps by accident, she was rightly treated as a citizen at that moment.

Daša, thank you for your remarks on Hannah Arendt, I really believe that the central question of what concept of judgment should concerted action rely upon is an excellent question. I do not have a clear answer to it, but I would be most interested in trying to think through Arendt's writings on reflective judgment and aesthetic judgment in Kant in relationship to concerted action. If we could put those different strains of Hannah Arendt together it would be quite amazing. My worry has always been that the one who judges is a more or less free, spontaneous, sovereign, reasonable creature. And that is not a "we", that is not a "plural we" who is exercising judgment (or that the "plural we" is sometimes modeled on sovereignty). Especially in Arendt's work on civil disobedience, or when she writes about moral responsibility under dictatorship, then we really are holding individuals responsible for not simply saying, "I refuse to follow the laws of the Nazi regime". They fail in matters of personal individual judgment. But to think judgment in relationship to plurality and to concerted action, I think she did not do it. Perhaps I am wrong, but I think it is left to us to do it really. She seems to be the person who has gone as far as possible in that way, and I would be willing to be led and illuminated. So, thank you very much.

Zsazsa, I do not know whether you were suggesting that one reason I prefer precarity over identity is that precarity allows me to think about livability whereas identity would compel me to think about justice. Was that the point you were making? Well, I would certainly want to talk about justice, but I guess what eludes me is why it is that identity is the link to justice. I do not see an immediate link. Maybe I am missing something terribly obvious. It seems to me that there are all kinds of ways of asking for justice. We can ask for the just distribution of wealth, we can ask for legal justice in relationship to atrocities committed, we can ask for a just society in which laws and political organization are open and transparent. I am not sure how any of those particular versions of justice would rely on identity. Sometimes identity claims are about wanting to be recognized. Identity seems more related to the question of recognition than to justice, but maybe there is a link there

that I am not seeing. But I would hope that I would be able to account for demands for justice, as I hope I would be able to account for judgment as a kind of plural action. Although it is not what I do here, and that may well be a limitation of this book.

I very much appreciate your other point, which is that all identity categories are multiply created, multiply determined, which means that they are not as identitarian as we might think. So I appreciate that very much: that is a very good point. However, your last intervention – that the term precarity has not been sedimented in political discourse as much as identity, and in that sense it is not yet fully determined, or it provides more openness – is interesting. I think that Petar and some others are going to suggest that precarity is embedded in fact in forms of paternalism, which I am going to wait to respond to. But let me simply say this: I am not choosing to focus on the term precarity for arbitrary reasons. I am noticing, of course, that there are mobilizations in and around precarity and that this has been a term that I understand to be developed to supplement the idea of the proletariat. The proletariat is a group of exploited workers, and it seems to me that the precariat go in and out of work, they cannot even necessarily be understood primarily as workers because the status of worker is not fully available to them, given the way in which employment has become temporary, or contingent, or retractable. It is not possible to become constituted as proletariat political subject with the same consistency and durability. So, I am trying to follow these mobilizations, and if that's "precarity" proves not to be the most important political signifier, that is ok. I do not think that it has to be one term around which people mobilize. I think there are a number of such terms, maybe I would say a family resemblance of signifiers that we might be able to collect and think about as mobilizing, having a certain mobilizing force of holding out an aspirational possibility. We will come back to this once paternalism enters the scene.

Petar Bojanić

(IFDT, University of Belgrade)
bojanic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

In my brief remarks, I will try to be as concise as possible. I will try to problematize what I have read last few days in this book and in Judith Butler's lecture, keeping in mind that I have not been able to, for example, look into the functioning of *vulnerabilité* in Levinas (and how Butler reads him). What interests me most of all is what holds us together, what keeps us bound, what allows for living or acting together. (And there are myriad responses to this question – are we held together by money, interest, crime, collective killing, collective intentionality? Is there group or collective consciousness, etc.? Also, I am of course interested, along with many others, whether it is

really possible to find a different common action beyond the corporation or company?) Further, I wonder, are we really held together by these two protocols, vulnerability and precarity? If you look at the titles of interviews conducted with Butler in Argentina and Brazil from June of this year, you will notice an international of those in *precarità* or *precarité* or in "precarity" ("*Somos todos potencialmente precàrion*;" "*alianca entre os precàrions*;" a word which functions entirely differently in Romance languages).

The question from the chapter "Precarious Life and the Ethics of Cohabitation," "What is the relation between precarity and vulnerability?" (109) but also Butler's awareness that there is "the risk of using the term 'vulnerability'," "There is of course an even more sinister way of wielding both categories of precarity and of vulnerability" (143), her various hesitations, etc. – all center in Butler's project to gently modify Hannah Arendt ("I would suggest, when vulnerability is itself mobilized, not as an individual strategy, but in concert" and "to think vulnerability and agency together" [139], or else "to mobilize vulnerability in concert" [140], as well as "mobilizing precarity," "to show us the simultaneity of being precarious and acting"). The biggest problem, it seems to me, from the lecture on Vulnerability/Resistance and from the book is constructed around paternalistic power. "A most important criticism," says Butler, "emerges from those who argue that vulnerability cannot be the basis for group identification without strengthening paternalistic power." This is followed by Butler's attempt to improvise a swift and effective response. My question is how is it possible *a priori* to cleanse vulnerability or precarity of paternalistic histories when they are its integrative part?

Let me elaborate: the moment of resistance, apart from the group or "mobilizing precarity," necessarily implies the existence of a strong instance of sovereignty. This could be easily shown through a legal history of "precariousness protocol," which sums up the entire political theology of the Western world and Christianity. The word precarity or *précaire* appears for the first time in the 16th century (Levinas, I recall, uses the phrase "ontological precarity" [*la précarité ontologique*] saying that the face is "precarity more precarious than all precarity" [*précarité plus précaire que toute précarité*]). It comes from Latin legal jargon, *precarius*, and means "obtained by praying" (*prex*). Surprisingly, this origin is at once juridical and religious (or pseudo-religious). This etymology would indicate that all precarity is synonymous with dependence on a curatorial power, regardless of its precise nature, which could give us what we ask, or refuse our request, or even withdraw it from us at any moment after having given it – whence the idea that anything precarious is poorly established and secured. However, this etymology also at once signals that human precarity is not exclusively a contemporary issue, nor indeed a recent one. By definition, there is precarity wherever there is power. To reiterate: "precarity" exists in a place where: (1) there is power that can be solicited (asked, begged) for something (usually land or some

71

such benefit), (2) something has been lent or borrowed without a contract (a transaction that is not a legal act [*acte juridique*], not an obligation, but a simple fact), (3) it is not a lending or borrowing with a specific date of return (*commodatum*), but the owner decides on their own when the precarious [précariste] must return the land (this is called *precarium*; in Naples, in 1772, Giambatisto Vico writes in the margin of his book *Il diritto universale* about the *precarium* as the origin of the contract; a hundred years prior, Hugo Grotius writes about Jews to whom the Roman emperor allowed the conduct of public ritual and the following of their own laws based on *jus precarium*, and not on the laws of the empire (*non ex lege aliqua imperio addità*). Meaning, that he could have abolished them whenever he so wished.

It seems entirely clear to me, then, why Abraham insists on purchasing the land on which to bury Sarah, and not accept it as a "gift," and why, on the other hand, the various 17th century converts, who abandon Judaism, think that precarity is a sign of malediction [*la précarité est signe de malédiction*]. Conversely, a good example that could also be thematized is as follows. If the great legacy of the French revolution was to make all work of limited duration in order to prevent the risk of slavery and servitude (since, as we know, there were no contracts of unlimited duration until the end of the 19th century), or if people have consciously accepted precarity as a common resistance to becoming individually subjugated, it is uncertain whether inequality is thus reduced or even if the master or sovereign is thus lesser. Assuming that the goal of resistance is to bring more justice, might we ask, does justice reduce vulnerability? Thank you very much.

Katarina Lončarević

(Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade)
katarina.loncarevic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

Since I have only five minutes, I cannot discuss all the important topics Judith Butler explores in her new book. But I must say that all the issues raised in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* are important for us today, for our lives and our struggles against injustice and inequalities we face. First, as a feminist, I must say that this book is very important from a feminist perspective, because almost all the problems you discuss are problems that feminists explore: from subversion of the dichotomy between traditionally political and nonpolitical sphere, over the analysis of the concept of the individual, to relationship between "I" and "We" and discussion of possibility of joint political action… However, in these few minutes I would like to say something about the concept of vulnerability as one of the crucial concepts analyzed in the book. It is a very important concept for feminism as well, and as you say in chapter four ("Bodily Vulnerability and Coalition Politics") "feminist theorists have for a long time argued that women suffer

social vulnerability disproportionately" (Butler 2015: 140). You recognize in the book and you said yesterday during the lecture something about the dangers of understanding that "women have an unchanging and defining vulnerability" (Ibid), because it leads to asking a "paternal authority for special … protections", and at the very same time "affirms that inequality of power that situates women in a powerless position" (Ibid: 141). So, I agree with you that vulnerability is not totally active or passive, and that vulnerability and resistance can and do happen at the same time, and we can see that in different feminist claims.

I am going to use the opportunity that you are here today among us to ask a question about something that is absent from the new book (although not from your previous work), but it is close to you and your work, namely I would like to hear a little bit more about the concept of vulnerability presented in the theory of your colleague and friend Bracha Ettinger among others. Ettinger's work is not unknown to the wider audience, because she was in Belgrade last year as the keynote speaker at the Summer School for Sexualities, Cultures and Politics, organized by our colleague Jelisaveta Blagojević on behalf of *Ipak Center* and Faculty of Media and Communications.

The concept of vulnerability is one of the crucial concepts in your recent work (not only in this book) as well as in Ettinger's work (and not only hers; I am using her as an example of a different position from yours). Ettinger and you are inspired by, but also very critical of two authors: Arendt and Levinas. And both you and Ettinger conceptualize vulnerability in a similar, yet different way, in part due to different theoretical frameworks, which, I believe, can nevertheless communicate with each other. For both of you, the body that is vulnerable is a crucial point, the body is always already vulnerable and it is important to recognize the same vulnerability (or potential for vulnerability) of the other. For both of you interdependency is important, although you two do not use the same terminology when speaking about interdependency, but for both the subject is never alone, never isolated, and always dependent on the others.

I believe that the crucial points of disagreement are, first, Ettinger's invitation to return to transubjective precondition of subjectivization (trans-subjectivity for Ettinger is co-emergence of I and non-I). And second, while both of you speak about vulnerability of the subject, of the body, Ettinger claims the recognition of the vulnerability of the other and self-fragilization as a chosen position (she believes that self-fragilization is the position upon which you can act because one chooses to self-fragilize in an encounter with the other) (Ettinger 2006a; 2006b; 2011).

From this point, it seems to me that the differences in your and Ettinger's account of vulnerability can have different ethical and political consequences. And despite the fact that your account of vulnerability is much

closer to the account of vulnerability I would embrace, I am asking you to explain, from your point of view, differences between these accounts of vulnerability, especially because you are reluctant to accept self-fragilization as a chosen position.

Brigita Miloš

(Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty for Humanities, University of Rijeka)
bmilos@ffri.hr

Movements and the Balkans

Judith Butler's latest book, *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* was published at approximately the same time as the (European) public acknowledgement of the so-called refugee crisis, i.e. the mass arrival of people mostly from the Middle East (but also Africa) to Europe. The motivations behind their emigration are different (war in Syria, political or economic deprivation in Afghanistan, Sudan etc.), but their goal is the same – to reach one of Western Europe's developed countries. A significant part of this moving population passes through the geographical region of the Balkans, and it did not take long for the media to coin the name "The Balkan Route" (interestingly enough, there has never been "The Italian Route" regardless of the fact that Italy has in the last couple of years been the principle entry point onto European ground).

The term 'route' evokes the notions of passing through, of mobility or movement. Butler writes: "Mobility is itself a right of the body, but it is also a precondition for the exercise of other rights, including the right of assembly itself" (Butler 2015: 138). It is exactly this dual nature of mobility/movement that seem especially plausible in the context of the "newcomers" passing through the Balkans.

People arriving in Europe – migrants, immigrants, refugees, expatriates, emigrants, exiles – share the notion of precarity with the people mentioned as examples of assembled action in Butler's book, as well as vulnerability to a great extent. This is especially the case, I believe, due to their absolute exposure to others. They move towards and through the Balkans in accordance with one another, as well as with all the possible support they are able to get, often not official, or legal, usually overtly criminal. (What would be the right way to update Agamben's notion of police and humanitarians as being the only instances of dealing with the refugees' needs?)

I am not sure, though, whether it is possible to call their 'movements' concerted in the same sense as the amassing of undocumented workers, or the Occupy movement, or even of the refugee uprisings in refugee camps in demand for food, shelter or sanctuary. For it seems that in this particular case, the movements within the (refugee) camps differ from 'bare mobility'

or mobility as a precondition of the right to (political) movement in one small but important feature: there is no hint of anything that might point towards their engaging in a concerted (cl)aim to make a different societal surrounding in the Balkans, for example one that claims the (free) right of passage through the area. In other words, it seems that the Balkans is not recognized as a place good enough to make a claim for political visibility/reality. The people who arrive do not intend to occupy the streets or squares of the Balkans in revolt because of things of which they are deprived. They actually want to pass through the Balkans, preferably as quickly as possible in order to reach a different place where, I suppose, they believe their life could become a livable one, or even a good one, regardless of the fact that practice often shows the opposite. The Balkan Route functions simply as a space of traversing, of momentariness; it figures as a space not shaped for claiming the right to (make a) movement, but one that could be utilized for many purposes with regards to demanding bodies in mobility – taking inventories of life and death, young and old, refugees or immigrants, woman and man. Bio-bureaucratization is at the threshold of Europe and for the purposes of the systematic and regulated transition of bodies from un-recognizable "bare life" to "rightless" or "already but not yet" recognized in rights, agencies or reality.

Is it the case that a "sedentary" situation of uprisings and demands in the (refugee) camps all over Europe exceeds in reality "nomadic" wandering through the Balkans? Butler writes: "Those who are excluded from existing polities, who belong to no nation-state or other contemporary state formation, may be deemed "unreal" only by those who seek to monopolize the terms of reality. And yet, even after the public sphere has been defined through their exclusion, they act. Whether they are abandoned to precarity or left to die through systemic negligence, concerted action still emerges from their acting together" (Butler 2015: 80-81). In a certain sense, the "newcomers" take over and pass through various areas that in many ways become "public"/politicized in a different ways than before, when their bodies were not appearing there – for example, the illegal crossing of green borders; pressure on opening the 'soft' ones; and on the other hand putting up barbed wire or building walls along state borders… All of these situations are present and connected to the fact of passing through, or stopping for the moment of the gathered/arrived bodies. This is not an effect of a concerted action of a refugee uprising in demand for free passage, but more as a consequence of the (dis)orientation of the Balkan political establishment in a situation that shows clearly all the dimensions of the inconsistencies of the European political mainstream.

Would, then, the phrase "acting together" be applicable to the fact of an en masse arrival of people mostly from the Middle East to Europe? Or is it some other form of acting, some form that belongs to a state of affairs that are maybe 'prepolitical' or some other register of things we do not yet have the

75

language to describe? How should the public claim of those people, consisting of being able to live a livable life in the countries that rarely and occasionally recognize Middle Eastern lives as grievable, be thought of?

And in connection to this, is the space/area of the Balkans (traditionally treated as an Other of Europe) possible as a space of concerted, public action that can bring about "radical democratic change?" Or is it the case that the Balkan "saturation in power relations" (Butler 2015: 80) reveals, traditionally again, clear-cut "dominant and subjugated forms" (Butler 2015: 80)? For it seems that the mere name *Balkan Route* functions as a performative act, which enacts shapes and situates assembled bodies aiming to traverse a specific space, as well as those destined to live in this very space. Especially regarding the fact that insecurity over the grievability of Balkan lives amounts to a certainty over understanding the Balkans as a space that is between (European) borderlines.

76

Judith Butler

Responses to Petar Bojanić, Katarina Lončarević and Brigita Miloš

I will try to be brief. These are all, of course, really excellent questions. I find myself surprised and pleased by every question I receive in Belgrade, I do not know why that is. It is not that I had a different expectation, it is that the form of engagement is extremely serious and thoughtful and respectful and there is nothing formulaic about it. So I cannot just occupy a role and… "oh, that question again," which is what I am sometimes used to doing.

First of all, let us think a little bit about this extraordinary etymology of precarity that Petar has offered us. I think there are at least two questions raised by the etymology. Is it possible to disjoin precarity from the paternalistic tradition from which it comes, and is it possible to disjoin precarity from the idea of an arbitrary sovereign, which is a very specific kind of paternalism? The figure of the arbitrary sovereign who decides when and where and whether the precarious must return the land, and in relation to whom the precarious are beseeching, begging. I want to suggest is that it is precisely this etymology that offers a certain kind of descriptive power. In other words, the term precarity offers by virtue of this etymology a descriptive power for certain kinds of relations that we experience in the present. I think one could actually read this through the work of Giorgio Agamben in an interesting way, thinking about the precarious as bare life, or as a population subject to sovereign expulsion or containment or both. But what interests me about the etymology provided is that precarity exists where there is a power to whom the precarious makes its petition, and that relation is one of abasement; in other words, those who are precarious are in the position of living at the whim of a sovereign who is under no contractual obligation to engage the precarious in a just or

fair way. It is an importantly pre-legal condition of dependency and petition. The precarious have to formulate their petition and abase themselves before a power that may or may not countenance the request.

So why would such a term be brought forward to describe contemporary relations of labor and dispossession? Well, one reason is that labor contracts have become a thing of the past, that we are entering again into a situation where people are working without a contract, or long-term contracts are nullified, or short-term contracts have qualifications built into them that give the employer the possibility of ending the contract at will. So, we are seeing the destruction of labor unions and syndicalism in various parts of the world, and we also see the outsourcing of labor to countries where the regulation of labor practices are weak or nullified, so that labor can be exploited outside of recognizable conventions of contracting, outside of the reach of international labor law. It is that outsourcing of labor that has produced the contemporary situation of precarity both for those deprived of labor, and those employed under conditions in which contracts have been decimated. Now, Petar is right to point out that precarity is bound up with paternalism and with arbitrary sovereign power, but maybe what we are actually seeing is a re-entry of this idea of precarity into the contemporary world precisely on the grounds that the idea of reliable labor contracts and contractually guaranteed long-term employment have been nearly destroyed and we are now falling back into this pre-legal situation, or perhaps a pre-modern form of legality. If so, then who are the arbitrary sovereigns of our contemporary scene? Well, they are corporations, they are sometimes universities that hire contingent faculty and abandon them before they have a chance to achieve security. But they are also financial institutions, and the way that finance has entered into the social organization of work. That is becoming an increasing norm where I live and where I visit.

So it is a world of broken contracts and weakened or eviscerated labor unions and labor laws. The trans-national labor practices are now ones that can, and do, consistently break with internationally regulated labor laws and maybe this is what reanimates such a term from the past. Now, when you say that the sovereign or the figure of paternal power is integrated into the very concept, I do not know. I think we can trace that etymology and that gives us many related insights, and we can even say that that etymology illuminates the descriptive power of precarity in trying to describe the contemporary situation of those who are in and out of labor at the will of supervenient powers. However, to mobilize on the basis of that precarity, that is to say, to identify as the precarious or to oppose the condition of precarity is to reanimate the concept and the virtue of etymology *against* that etymology. I mean, anachronistic terms get reanimated for contemporary reasons and they become redeployed for counter-purposes and the etymology cannot constrain those movements n advance. There is nothing about the etymology that can

stop that redeployment or reanimation from happening. I love etymologies but I am not that much of a Heideggerian that I think they finally control the semantic reach of the concept. It was Derrida who raised some of those critical questions about the presumptive power of etymology to control the semantic reach of the term, was it not? It was iterability that posed the possibility of a constitutive interruption and deviation of that signifying chain.

Bracha Ettinger's work – yes – I engaged with in several essays, and she has engaged with mine, and she is responsible for alerting me to the importance of impressionability, what she calls primary impressions. And for her these are often psychic traces that cannot be consciously recuperated, but that leave their traces in the visual field in some way. I certainly have cited her before, and I have worked on her, I have written essays in her exhibition catalogues, and if I did not cite her in this book then that is just an oversight and I will correct it in the next edition. I worry that the idea of the *matrixial* in Ettinger's work gives a kind of primacy to the figure of the mother, and I think that, for me, I accept that there is this primary, radically non-volitional dependency, but I am not sure we can call this support system, even for the infant – I am not sure we can call this entire support system *maternal*. After all, there is an entire adult and institutional world that makes its primary impingements on the infant. Now, she might understand me as somehow engaging a rejection of the mother. Of course, the mother, if there is mother, plays a very large role, but when the maternal becomes the name for the matrix that implies that a certain social form is identical with that structural function. The truth is that infants are brought into the world under all kinds of conditions, and we have to develop several names for those forms. Let us remember as well that mothers are also supported, hopefully, by institutions and laws and networks of relations. I do not want the maternal to be the name for that that entire problematic of support systems. How do we think about hospitals, how do we think about healthcare, how do we think about shelter, how do we think about citizenship – all those things are there as vital and necessary forms of support for creatures defined in part by their dependency on those supports.

I accept that self-fragilization is an important strategy, if it is a strategy. It seems to me that fragility comes upon us non-volitionally, or that it is already there prior to any reflexive act of our own; I am not sure it can ever be fully marshaled by our deliberate efforts to form a strategy on the basis of that fragility. Perhaps fragility shares a family resemblance to vulnerability. I think that for Ettinger, self-fragilization becomes an important concept in a culture where military aggression and defensiveness have become the norm; there is an anti-military ethos in this idea of self-fragilization that I respect profoundly, and it is true that it probably would not be my term, but it does not mean I do not relate to it, or that I refute it.

As to the refugee crisis, briefly, I would simply say it is interesting to think about when and where refugees do in fact gather – and they are of course

compelled to gather at borders that are closed. And in some cases, like Calais (before it was forcibly scattered), there are minor polities that emerge in the camp, in the refugee camp. Who is going to represent the refugees, who is going to devise the strategy, who is going to speak to the NGOs, who is going to talk to the security guards, who is going to try to stop the train, who is going to get on the train? So, there are informal assemblies, and there are some people who are trying to offer informed descriptions about how that happens. It is an interesting remark about the Balkans being a country to be passed through, but not a destination. Perhaps we have to understand the phantasmatic character of the Eurozone, and the tales that are transmitted over borders and languages about the safety or possibilities that wait at the end of the line. But even as the refugees pass through the Balkans, they enact rights of passage, and here I would just go back to the point I mentioned yesterday, which is that rights of mobility or capacity for mobility are prior to gathering, they are prior to assembly. There has to be an assembling from a state of dispersal before there can be an assembly. Although, people can assemble as well in motion, in transit, in media res. So, I think there are some ways that moving and acting together and even stitching together forms of support for chronic forms of abandonment are really crucial. We have all followed reports on the sharing of cell phones regarding bus schedules and transit routes, blocks, security guards, police, and deportation possibilities. It is very interesting to think about the networks of support that take place over cell phones, all of them suggest modes of acting, thinking and deliberating that are mediated within virtual frameworks of space and time. I think there is much more that can be thought about in relationship to those networks, how the virtual intersects with embodied life, both its constraints and its mobility. There may have to be many people moving for anyone to move, and yet the movement of the many is never a single movement. The cell phone involves a certain movement, but it is also a crucial technological dimension of mobility and the movement.

Athena Athanasiou

(Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens)
athenaathanasiou2@gmail.com

Your book, Judith, asks about the embodied and plural political performativity of public assembly, especially when freedom of assembly is coming under increasing assault, because the very public spaces of assembling and protesting are dispossessed by capitalist forces of corporatization and privatization, forces of anti-immigrant securitization and the "constitutive exclusions" by which the body politic is established and are at work in the performative power of subject formation. In mobilising your unconditional concern with conditions and conditionality, you ask who "the people" may be, what counts as "public," and how people come together even when the conditions for

their acting together have been devastated. "The people," you write, "are produced by the conditions of possibility of their appearance." At the same time, "ways of avowing and showing certain forms of interdependency stand a chance of transforming the field of appearance itself." The conception of "the people" that you develop stands as a critique of both the managerial evisceration of political subjectivity and the conception of a total, unified, and exclusionary community forming always within existing borders.

Such a gesture allows the conception of "the people" to be critically displaced by those who have become rendered invisible and disposable: "those who cannot appear, who are constrained from appearing or who operate through virtual or digital networks" (8). The book implies a new and radical understanding of the public space of appearance essential to politics. I wonder, however, whether we might read Arendt with Foucault here: "space of appearance" as "trap of visibility." How, in becoming present to one another and in coming together in transformative modes of survival and persistence, might we become dispossessed by – and critically displace – the normative premises of "presence?"

80

One of the most important contributions that this book makes is that it indicates ways in which, in the context of critical practices emerging despite and against current regimes of subordination, political subjectivity is not enacted as grounded in a pre-existing solid foundation of the (present) self, but rather as brought about through collective modes of subjectivation and critical de-subjugation – echoing your reading of Foucault's "What Is Critique?" and your emphasis on de-subjugation. So I think the question of "appearance" might be fruitfully linked to the question of the specter, as the human whose humanity persists in spite of the forces that seek to expropriate its humanness. This is a figure that animates the conditions of im/possibility, which make performativity political. And it is crucial to the question of what *happens* when "we" come together as *sans papier*, queer, and unemployed: what happens to both the "we" and the "come-together." I am motivated here by Achille Mbembe's "The Well of Specters" and his analysis of the specter of the nègre. So what is spectral about the assembly? And how might it work to animate the assembly and unsettle the biopolitical matrix of subjectivation and de-subjugation?

Public assemblies, which have become a defining characteristic of political action in this decade, embody not only the struggle in the street but also, significantly, the struggle *for* the street. The intimate connection between struggle *in* the street and *for* the street gains suggestive resonance as a way of reflecting and engaging with forms of political subjectivity that are – or seek to become – possible in these times of autarchic governmentality and increasing securitization. A question that emerges here is this: how would the conception of taking action as taking to the streets shift from the perspective of people in the boats in the Mediterranean? What claims to the infrastructural, affective,

and institutional conditions for livability are enacted by refugees and un-documented migrants who pour over European borders or cross the Mediter-ranean waterways in overcrowded fishing boats demanding the right of life? Throughout the book, you give these questions new possibility. With your insistence on the concerted actions of the body – in its becoming "at once concretely vulnerable, even breakable, and potentially and actively defiant, even revolutionary" – you perform for us this possibility.

The book offers us valuable ways to account for the possibility of non-sovereign political agency: a notion of agency that is not reducible to an antecedent sovereign self, self-willed intentionality and the standards of possessive indi-vidualism. Instead, it remains immanent to power, socially involved and compromised, potent and vulnerable, contingent and indeterminate. Such "transient and critical gatherings" implicate the political and affective register of social relationality, freedom with others, questions of demarcated matrices of recognizability, as well as the gendered, sexual, racial, and economized implications of one's bodily exposure to one another and to embedded power. The notion of non-volitional and non-individualistic agency reaches far back into your oeuvre. You now return to the theory of performativity, in extending its purview beyond speech acts to include embodied forms of coming together, in order to dwell on its transformative political implications and unravel them more specifically under conditions of precarity and neoliberal dispossession. Performativity does not just indicate how we come to act, but also how we are differentially affected by discursive and institutional power and how we are animated and moved with others and by others in relation to our common but differential precarity and in relation to making room for new forms of being beside oneself and being-together. The book asks how we might come to be asking the question about acting. It does so by taking us beyond satu-rated, typical debates between Leninist "vanguardism" and late-Autonomist "spontaneity", or those who seek vertical organization and others who under-score the benefits of activist horizontality and the "commons."

The question then becomes: is the assembly a new political institution? Is it a provisional figure of struggle? Is it an embodied form of radical democracy? Does it seek to describe and build a post-party political formation that differs from or rejects a politics of representation? Understanding public assemblies as plural forms of performative action brings to the fore the question of how different this is from liberal pluralism. I think one possible answer is given in the book, when you write: "The point of a democratic politics is not simply to extend recognition equally to all of the people, but, rather, to grasp that only by changing the relation between the recognizable and unrecognizable can (a) equality be understood and pursued and (b) "the people" become open to a further elaboration" (5).

"Popular sovereignty", as a key term of the democratic lexicon, might produce a quandary here. As political subjects are increasingly destituted of their

sovereign status, in contexts of desiccated popular sovereignty, is there a call for sovereignty to be made or are we in need of alternative conceptual and affective devices which would not reiterate founding acts of violence implicated in the ethicopolitical genealogy of sovereignty (a genealogy premised upon the normative presumptions of the proper subject and the proper body politic)? Are we perhaps challenged to account for *another* sovereignty and render it an occasion for a radical politics of resignification? Do public assemblies themselves constitute a sovereignty alternative to reigning frames of sovereignty? So another (always-open) question that emerges for me here is the following: What critical form of politics does public assembly embody and enact in the context of dispossessed popular sovereignty? To what extent does this plural, transient, and embodied action return to safeguard values of liberal democracy that are under attack by neoliberal rationality and to what extent does it constitute a critical resignification of it or even an alternative to it? Is this not about an aporetic work of simultaneous safeguarding and critically resignifying democracy?

82

Finally, one of the most thought-provoking points of this book, for me, is the delicate distinction you make, Judith, between non-violent and passive resistance. Non-violent resistance, you suggest, "does not just say no to a violent world, but crafts the self and its relation to the world in a new way, seeking to embody, however provisionally, the alternative for which it struggles." How would this distinction relate to the political labor of thinking vulnerability and agency together and of thinking non-violence as agentive? How would it imply an understanding of agency as always already traversed by the norms and passions of vulnerability? How would it help unsettle reigning notions of the political?

Adriana Zaharijević

(IFDT, University of Belgrade)
zaharijevic@instifdt.bg.ac.rs

Borrowing the link between academic and activist from Eric Fassin's lecture[3], I am now choosing to act in that role, stressing its state of emergency, demobilization, depression and resistance. My question-comment leans specifically on the fifth chapter of *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, but it is also in conversation with *Dispossession* and *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, notably, two books enacted in feminist dialogue (See: Butler, Athanasiou 2013; Butler, Spivak 2007). The fifth chapter is concerned with the freedom of assembly, the right which can never be held alone (Butler 2015: 186). What interest me about this individual right – which is also almost inherently collective – is its exercise within and against the state. Even more

---

3   Eric Fassin, 'Mobilizing Publics. Intellectuals, Activists, and the Political Work of Representation', November, 2015, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeb-oEIj1AY.

precisely, I want to understand consequences of the claim that freedom of assembly has to precede and exceed any form of government that confers or protects that right of assembly.[4]

In order to do so I would contextualize this claim in one possible way, and with one further claim: it is my wager that this book, which is not on feminism, is more feminist than any other Butler wrote. Thus I wish to link feminism, which is in this book a very broad and, I would say, purposefully indefinite designation, with what is being termed as popular sovereignty. Throughout the book, popular sovereignty is taken as something different from state sovereignty. It is sometimes defined as contrary to it, at other times as its condition of possibility, and still at others as the power to challenge or even topple the state sovereignty. Exercising freedom to assemble in common, bodily enacting popular sovereignty, is referred to as an "anarchist interval" or "permanent revolution" (Butler 2015: 163). I wonder in what way it also has to be thought of as a "feminist interval."

I am thinking of feminism as a kind of split with the state, or as a perpetual act of separating from the state, especially when state acts as (a) the facilitator in the expansion of the markets that transforms public entitlements into consumer goods and investment opportunities, (b) as the producer of jettisoned lives, and (c) as the instiller of fear through its military might which forecloses the possibility of popular assembly. Rallying against life as unlivable – life of the human capital, jettisoned life or enclosed life which is privatized by its internalization of fear – has to be a deeply feminist concern. Putting livable life at the forefront of politics induces skepticism towards the state which acts as the deliverer of paternalist power: as the provider of citizenship rights, differentially allocated and distributed, and provider of protection which can be taken away and withdrawn. Then, can a politics devoid of retrenchment in paternalism – which incorporates both market paternalism and military paternalism – ever be realizable within a model of a nation-state? Can feminism ever be pro-state, or when, at what point, in what kind of state (if any), can we claim that we are dealing with a feminist-friendly of even feminist state?

Vedran Džihić

(Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Vienna)
vedran.dzihic@univie.ac.at

Questions and thought on resistance in the periphery

As I understand Judith Butler to be an intensely politically engaged thinker my remarks will be guided by a two-fold outing inspired by Butler's

---

4   See also Judith Butler's Istanbul Lecture: 'Freedom of Assembly, or Who are the People?' September, 2013, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yd-7iT2JtXk.

lecture and her new book on performative theory of assembly. I am outing myself as a frustrated citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or to put it differently a citizen of Former Yugoslavia frustrated with being in-between, on the periphery and irrelevant, ruled by a nexus of political and economic elites, parasiting on the permanent transition to a democracy-era characterized by a mixture of authoritarian and patriarchal *habitus*, neoliberal pragmatism and ethno-nationalist ideologies. This is the background against which an average citizen in Post-Yugoslav societies in the last 20 years was put on the margin and reduced to a new transitional *precariat*, sentenced to an "unlivable life" (Butler 2015: 201). Listening to Judith Butler speaking here in Serbia, in one of the societies where forms of radical solidarity in opposition to political and economic forces are rather rare and when showing up on the surface is suppressed, either through direct or more frequently subtle repression, I simply have to read her book as a deeply political book.

84

Second, following Adriana Zaharijević's reading of Butler's book as a feminist one, at the same time inspired by Butler's narrative on bodily actions and performative assembly of bodies as well as her term of vulnerability as a part of political resistance, I have to out myself as a feminist utopian urged to provide an argumentation able to create a framework to pose one final feminist utopian question at the end of my intervention.

My starting question is how much is the newly emerging competitive and neoliberal/competitive authoritarianism that I see flourishing in the region built upon patriarchal negation and exclusion of the female and all other non-heterosexual identities? To recompose my question I argue that there is precisely this patriarchal negation and exclusion of the female, and it is by the police and prisons (both in the metaphoric and literal sense of the word – here following Butler: "All public assembly is haunted by the police and the prison" [185]) that societies of Former Yugoslavia are kept "stable." Besides, I regard the term "stability" as a new paradigm of both the EU and the so-called international community when dealing with peripheries and so called transitional societies. Former Yugoslav countries outside the EU and all other countries encompassed by the EU's Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy belong to this form of periphery.

The second paradigm that has emerged in the region in the last two decades of "transitioning to democracy" is described by the term "pragmatic." Only if politicians and citizens behave "pragmatically" and "deliver" in the so called "school of democracy" run by the EU and the Internationals[5] that democracy will start emerging and freedom will prevail. The problem is

---

5   See here Boris Buden's thought on the permanent transition to democracy in his book *Zonen des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (2009).

only that looking at the very bleak results of democratization and authoritarian trends in the majority of the countries of Former Yugoslavia in 2016 we cannot avoid to label the process of transitioning to democracy as failed, at least measured against the promises of democracy euphorically formulated at the beginning of the 1990s. This is the moment where we can easily expose pragmatism as a cynical and in the end neoliberal ideology designed for countries in the periphery to keep them "stable" while accepting that the political game is dictated by (new) ruling political and economic elites.

Pragmatism as a new ideology of the permanent "transitional present" is alluding to precarity as used by Butler, since it is drawing a line between the few (called pragmatic elites and their clientele) and the masses (deprived, being a new precariat). As soon as we accept and adjust to pragmatism we immediately reject any kind of progressive political ideology in favor of empirical facts and reality, which again is – at least in the region of Former Yugoslavia but not only – shaped by the peculiar mixture of neoliberalism, nationalism and various forms of authoritarianism.

Here we can think further and extend the argumentation to yet another important term from Butler's thinking, namely freedom understood as a term around which we organize our political resistance: "Freedom can only be exercised if there is enough support for the exercise of freedom, a material condition that enters into the act that it makes possible."[6]

The question that arises here is basically how to exercise freedom in spaces and political entities on the periphery (like in the case of Post-Yugoslav countries) where freedom has been reduced and literally stolen, leading to a situation where material conditions for freedom are missing, where freedom discursively and in terms of realpolitik was miss-appropriated by transitional political and economic elites, or to put it more broadly in the sense mentioned above, by neoliberal ethno-nationalist conundrum. So, the question is how to reverse and renew the meaning of freedom, and how to reclaim democracy, and freedom in the periphery caught in seemingly endless transition to democracy?

One possible answer would be the one provided by Wendy Brown in her ferocious act to protect the very term of freedom and consequently liberal democracy from its (neoliberal) opponents. In one of her interviews prior to the publication of her book *Undoing Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, she is "in favor of trying to rehabilitate the term (democracy), give it substance, reawaken its potential, not only for emancipation and

---

6   Judith Butler, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, Manuscript for the Keynote lecture given on 20th November 2016 in Belgrade.

equality but also for a notion of popular sovereignty".[7] Brown relates the process of reawakening the emancipatory potential to struggles by groups of citizens (be it in the Arab Spring, Occupy or Gezi-Park movement) fighting to „reclaim democracy as something that has to do with more equality than it has been used to signify in recent neoliberal decades, and also more control by the people." (Ibid.) But how to organize the process of reinventing and re-energizing democracy as an emancipatory term? And what place to find for the people?

As aspects of sudden or provisional assembly are already – without entering the debate on self-constitution and struggles over "who we are" – a major new formation of the public space able to confront the authoritarian state (regime) on the periphery with a quest for freedom, equality and solidarity, for a "life as livable." Here we might think of whether, how and if not why protests in Bosnia in February 2014, collective actions on the streets of Skopje recently, or many other forms of assemblies in the newly emerging illiberal belt in Eastern and Southeastern Europe (including Hungary, Poland, Turkey) are able (or made unable) to change the parameters of "life as unlivable."

Finally, following Adriana Zaharijević's[8] argument that freedom to assemble, besides bodily enacting popular sovereignty, also embodies feminist principles. To bring the argument back to Butler's book, I am arguing that this above mentioned specific form of neoliberal authoritarianism with patriarchal negation and exclusion of the female, built upon terms of "stability," "pragmatism" and ethnic nationalism, is preventing new forms of public assembly in the region of Former Yugoslavia and keeping the regimes alive. If this is right we might argue that precisely feminism can be taken as a key to understand and to attack these newly emerging post-transitional illiberal/authoritarian regimes. It is – to invert Putin's words directed against Pussy Riot – the feminist fight against the "soul of man" (13) that can attack these regimes, both in ideological terms as well as in political terms.

This is precisely the place where we need Butler's term of "vulnerability," more precisely her affirmative use of vulnerability, "understood as a 'deliberate exposure to power' as a part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment." (15) Against the concerns that "vulnerability is disjoined from resistance, mobilization, and other forms of

---

7   See Wendy Brown, *Reclaiming Democracy: An Interview with Wendy Brown on Occupy, Sovereignty, and Secularism, in Critical Legal Thinking*, January 30th 2013, http://critical-legalthinking.com/2013/01/30/reclaiming-democracy-an-interview-with-wendy-brown-on-occupy-sovereignty-and-secularism/
Of course, the sense that democracy (and the notion of freedom) needs to be reconstituted is widely shared by authors and scholars ranging from Skinner (1998) Runciman (2005), Derrida (2006) or Badiou (2006).

8   See Adriana Zaharijević's contribution in this volume.

deliberate and agentic politics," (16), Butler argues that "the very meaning of vulnerability changes when it becomes understood as part of the very practice of political resistance" and that "we can come to understand bodily vulnerability as something that is actually marshaled or mobilized for the purposes of resistance." (18-19)

When we speak about resistance in the periphery characterized by patriarchal and patrimonial male structures with male bodies deeply inscribed into the authoritarian inner-life of the regime and the "other" in gender terms is automatically marginalized and excluded, we have to imagine the resistance as a truly feminist endeavor. To put it in Butler's words,

> Feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and, in fact, all minorities subject to police power for showing up and speaking out as they do. (20)

This brings me back to the beginning of my intervention and to the announced utopian feminist question: Can a feminist rallying against "life as unlivable" be the way out for the peripheral regions in East- and Southeastern Europe, more precisely in the Post-Yugoslav realm? Or to put it differently, to argue that only a moment where feminism becomes pro-state can be a moment where freedom, responsibility and thus democracy will come back to the region on a broader scale than in this very room.

Judith Butler

Responses to Athena Athanasiou, Adriana Zaharijević, Vedran Džihić

Wonderful. Many important issues raised. First of all, thank you Athena for your trenchant comments. It is true that plural action and plurality are not quite the same as pluralism, and how to think about differentiating those terms is important. I certainly read and engage the work of William Connolly on that topic, interested in the way that "pluralization" works for him, but perhaps I also move in a slightly different direction than he does. I agree that it is important to think about assembly in ways that are not constrained by the accepted parameters of liberal democracy.

In your remarks you also suggest that perhaps something we might call humanity is understood as persisting even as the human has fallen into crisis, so how are we to think about that? Is there also a resignification of the human going on? I am reminded of the importance of resituating humanness and the human animal as one form of creaturely life among others, and that this is in part a way of understanding, perhaps developing a different

bio-political vocabulary, one that does not disavow the animal in the human, the animality *of* the human, but also the human dimensions of companionate species, as Donna Haraway reminds us. But also, perhaps we need another name to think about the dignity of this persistence that happens among humans who are with cruelty expelled from the human norm by those who seek to monopolize its definition in the service of racial projects. Is something we might still call humanity that which emerges precisely when the expulsion is refused either by those who are expected to execute that strategy or those who are subject to the brutality of that effacement. I am certainly not opposed to humanity. What would it mean to say that? That would be wrong, I certainly defend "the humanities" (in English), that is terribly important, although it is always possible to ask, where is humanity in the humanities? Let us speculate that humanity traverses and upends the logic of exclusion by which the human is produced and sustained. Even so, humanity brings with it its own specter, maybe the animal is the specter of humanity, or maybe none of us can have humanity without also engaging the spectral being of the animal. So, I appreciate the question of specter, since Derrida is in the room, and is always in the room when we try to think seriously about these issues. So, what is spectral in the assembly? I think that there are spectral assemblies in every assembly. I am re-reading now Marx's *18th Brumaire*, as a way of trying to think about how the anachronistic reemerges in an unexpected and animated form in the present. And of course, to even understand Syntagma, Gezi Park, Tahrir, all of these have enormous genealogies which are, I would say, selectively animated in the present, and maybe even the *Assemblée nationale* in the Jeu de Paume is with us as well. The question is whether the specter of past assemblies operates as an unfinished promise or unfulfilled history, or whether it actually disrupts the historical continuum. In the *18th Brumaire*, it was generally unexpected that the people would miss the monarchic power that they destroyed, and how easy it was for them to give up their freedoms to a power who seemed, if only unconsciously, to be a living substitute for that lost authoritarian ruler. The sequence: we have destroyed the monarchy! What have we destroyed! Oh look, we have destroyed nothing: the Ruler is back!

As for the politics of representation, I do not, cannot, reject it thoroughly. I accept, for instance, parliamentary democracy, even if the parliamentary form cannot exhaust all we mean by democracy. All forms of parliamentary democracy depend however on what I would call popular sovereignty. But popular sovereignty is not distinct from what Sheldon Wolin called the "fugitive" dimension of democracy: it supports and withdraws, it installs and destroys. When it no longer supports the parliamentary democracy that it elected, it can withdraw itself and threaten that government with delegitimation even if that government responds to that delegitimation with military force. And responding with military force only makes that regime more vulnerable to delegitimation; it does not mean that the government necessarily

comes down, it can continue. And there are non-military forms of coercion that we might think about as well, such as the constraints on information.

So this power to confer or withdraw legitimacy is one that belongs to a people quite regardless of whether or not it is recognized by law. It is an extra-legal power without which legal powers can only operate without legitimation. With this in mind, then, popular sovereignty may well be a term that maintains closer allegiances to anarchist moments, ones that we can find implicit in every parliamentary democratic form. I am not saying we should be anarchist rather than parliamentary democrats, no, I am saying there is an anarchist possibility within every parliamentary form; this is surely why so many democratic constitutions are so fearful of the mob, so fearful of the crowd, so fearful of the popular will, even fearful of its own elections, so that this popular moment has to be managed and constrained. In other words, a radically democratic potential always needs to be managed by every parliamentary democracy, and I think there is a tension there that I would want to preserve between the two. I also think, and perhaps this is because I have been thinking about the Middle East and Israel/Palestine, that popular sovereignty can be divisible. The sovereign is not necessarily a figure of indivisible unity or a master figure. I know it is often defined that way, but the definition does not help us. Sovereignty can be divisible; it can even be dispersed. I am extremely interested in the idea of a dispersed sovereignty. And it might be something other than pluralism, it might be a form of cohabiting in ways that acknowledge difference but also the obligatory claim cohabitation at the same time.

89

I also think that without sovereignty, it is very hard to defend the very important concept of political *self-determination* that is needed for decolonization efforts of all kinds. For example, it is important for Greece, which should be able to decide how it pays its debts, and manage its own economic activity, and surely should not be "owned" by Germany or the Eurozone or the World Bank. For Palestine, which has not yet seen the rights of political self-determination, for native peoples in Canada, Europe, the US and Mexico. Many indigenous movements rely very strongly on the concept of political self-determination and I think that that is linked with the idea of popular sovereignty, and I am not sure we should – just because sovereignty has a bad name – so quickly get rid of it altogether. But let us think about what it means or how it can be revised in those particular contexts. I am working on non-violence now, and I suppose I am working towards an idea of an aggressive non-violent strategy, and maybe I need to disavow passive resistance, but I think that there is a way of thinking non-violence as agentive and as aggressive, even as it refuses violence. There is another way of thinking about non-violence as non-action, and that seems important as well. If a strike is a non-action, a not-working, is it for that reason passive? I like to think about the emphatic refusal of violence. And maybe I will make an argument about that in time.

It is true that I want to claim that the freedom of assembly precedes and exceeds any form of government, and maybe that is an anarchist notion or maybe it is a popular democratic notion, or a populist view, I do not know. I do think that we would all do well to think about why Ernesto Laclau thought that there could be a left populism – maybe that would also be a question for Eric Fassin, given his own suggestion that perhaps we cannot really work with the idea of "the people" as such. Laclau published a book *On populist reason* making the case for a left populism, asking what makes them left and how do they work. Perhaps "the people" is a fiction, but that fact alone does not tell us whether it is an enabling or a disabling fiction.

I love it that everybody thinks this is a feminist book. I do not have any problem with that. But if it is feminist, it is also queer. Bernice Johnson Reagon spoke those beautiful passages on coalitions, emphasizing the difficulty of staying in coalitions, defining what a coalition is, especially across racial boundaries, what a feminist coalition is and can be (See Johnson Reagon: 2000). I rely on that enormously, but queer actions, especially those mobilized on the issues of HIV and violence, perhaps even before Occupy, have been crucial for my understanding of alignments and mobilization, of networks formed across time and space, even between the living and the dead. So, if it is going to be feminist, it has to be queer, or feminist/queer/radical-democratic.

I acknowledge that there has to be a utopian horizon within which we think and act. I guess I have come to that conclusion, I did not always think that, but I think experimenting with the possible is something we get to do in academic life, in universities and art, in our creative and theoretical work, and that it is a radical act when the very idea of another future becomes impossible to consider. So opening up the horizon of the possible is not a bad idea. Some horrible things can enter into the picture, of course – very bad possibilities – but also some other kinds of possibilities as well. I mean, this is where politics actually involves a kind of crafting, how we think about principles that can be crafted into forms of life: less as prescriptive than generative principles, considered as a matrix out of which a set of possibilities for life might be generated. I know that pragmatism has become a combative term, I think that Nancy Fraser has tried to suggest that pragmatism could be used for both feminism and for socialism, so maybe we need to consider that. But I do not know if feminism is the way out. I know that Butler cannot offer the way out. I was always worried that Bosnia became an example in US feminism when Catherine MacKinnon claimed that she "represented the women of Bosnia." I thought it was maybe a bad idea for her to say that. I think it is a really bad idea for US intellectuals to go touring around the world telling people what the way out might be. No. If anything, I come here to listen to you and become a slightly more informed and thoughtful person, by virtue of your challenges, as a consequence of what you tell me.

As for Adriana's question about feminism and the state, I do not have a categorical view. We can pose the questions abstractly: is there a way to refigure the state on feminist principles? Or, must feminism always be an anti-statist project? I would agree that feminism should not have as its primary goal state-building, but that does not mean that certain feminist principles should not organize state policy. Perhaps it is necessary to ask first about the contemporary condition of the state, since what we see is the dismantling of social democracy and health care, the outsourcing of basic services, and the implication of neo-liberal and market rationalities in state structures. If we oppose the dismantling of social services, the outsourcing of public goods, then do we do that in part on feminist grounds? If so, then we are interested in a renewed state structure, but are not in principle opposed to a state.

So, which state are we seeking to be part of, or not part of? Maybe we need a radical and feminist critique of neoliberalism and its privatization strategies and its market rationality in order to usher in a different set of values that would remind us of what the public good is, and of our obligation to preserve the public good, which does include various kinds of services from which women benefit – which does include education, healthcare and shelter. I am not sure what to say there, but my thinking is very dependent on Wendy Brown's on this issue. I heard Vedran's frustration and his voice, trying to speak, wondering about what can be said or heard from here, positioned on the periphery. I suppose we have to ask whether only the center maintains the conditions for freedom, or whether there is, as it were, an assembly among and for the peripheries. Yes, we are in a small room in a hostile environment, and we do not always know how to make change outside of the confines of academic life, but apparently the *Assemblée nationale* was in a small room in a hostile environment and finally emerged as quite a power. A lot of consequential movements have started in small rooms in hostile environments. Sometimes, as Virginia Woolf tells us, one needs a small room, a room of one's own, for the composition of thought. As Kafka tells us, it turns out that small rooms are adjacent to other rooms and corridors, passageways and adjoining buildings, and that much depends on how one regards the beginning and end of the spatial infrastructure that conditions livability. Anyway, thank you all for your difficult and important questions, I am most grateful and only sorry that I cannot address them all in the way that they surely deserve to be addressed.

Nikola Petković

(Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty for Humanities, University of Rijeka)
npetkovic@ffri.hr

After the holy trinity of gender, race and class faded away and *identity* simply replaced them by becoming *the* buzzword of the *academe* in the '90s, two terms emerged designating the beginning of the third millennium: *uncertainty*

and *precarity*. The fact that a fairly recent spell check still underlines precarity as an unknown term confirms its 'originality'. Since minds are always faster than their discursive articulation that uttered words turns into written discourse there is nothing wrong with the software-slowness—certainly nothing that would question the legitimacy of terminological 'innovations'. Actually, 'innovation' might be an inappropriate term here and I suggest to replace it by 're-contextualization'. Because people lived precarious lives filled with uncertainty since the very beginning of time. These two terms are today under the spotlights not because of their 'originality' or protean power of mimicry throughout Western history but because of the very fabric of the times we live in. Therefore all the criticisms that this reinvigoration of operative terminology suffers being seen as 'nothing new' I find rather misplaced. In terms of paradigm shift, be it in humanities, social or natural sciences, these terms are precisely here as a paradigmatic framework for understanding the world while hoping to change it. Since prior to making any effort to change the world (even in a utopian way of remodeling it discursively) we must be sure that we do our best to understand it, and since, at the moment, we have no better pair of terms as tools in reading our present, I strongly suggest to use them to the best of our abilities.

Two recent books confirm the importance of the pair: *The Cunning of Uncertainty* by Helga Nowotny (2016), and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* by Judith Butler. In this short note toward the re-contextualization of operative terminology that opens effective modes in our efforts to understand our present, I will address only Judith Butler's latest book, while seeking for modes of solidarity in the existing context of so-called special interest groups targeting particular spheres of interest that harm their very core of existence.

And here I speak from my personal experience while living in the US in the early '90s and witnessing the bracketing of interest among either racial, ethnic, religious issues or those of gender or sexual preference. The question I have (having in mind the entirety of Butler's work) is how productive it is to think within a respective group, sharing its experience, its vulnerability and precarity without making serious efforts to draw a diagonal cut through various but mutual sites of vulnerability.

After being asked this question, at the panel in Belgrade, Judith Butler recognized many important points, underscoring not only the content but also ways of elaborating the manifestations of special interest groups in the field. She pointed out that the situation in the US academy in which claims of identity are put forward is a very difficult one, while thinking that it does sometimes produce an ethnographic shock on the part of those who travel to US campuses and see how the logic of political identity gets reproduced in ways that are quite antagonistic and that produce rupture time and again.

She saw it being tight and said that she was not certain whether or not special interests are the best term to talk about dispersing solidarity the way I imagined it underscoring that special interest groups is the term that the Republican Party uses in order to talk about women – that means half the population has "special interests" and it's not the general will, they make a distinction between what is a special interest and who is the general public. Anybody who is marked by gender is, Butler said, a "special interest." But still, there is a really big question here how to deal with that marking and how it emerges in political discourse. Maybe we could slip forward and re-member that absolute identification with another, that is, being able to completely and utterly take the place of another in whatever it is they have suffered, or in whatever it is they struggle for – is not a possibility, and certainly not a basis of solidarity, it cannot be. Then she pointed out that a particular example of comparative genocide studies. They have done some really important work about exactly what can be said, how we establish a dialogue on atrocity, a dialogue on mass death, how we establish a dialogue on the technologies of state-sponsored murder. All those questions are really important to think about in common, even though many of us come to these issues from very different historical circumstances.

93

Biljana Kašić

(Department of Sociology, University of Zadar)
bi.kasic@unizd.hr

Critical claims and critical 'eyes': the people

Reading *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* was certainly an exciting theoretical venture. Not only because this book deepened but also because it articulated in a fresh and lucid manner Judith Butler's already on-going self-conversation and responses to the key issues of the historical present. These issues which include precarity, political agency, vulnerability, violence, resistance, dissent, discrimination, responsibility, among others, particularly appeared in her books *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?,* and *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, written in the form of a dialogue with Athena Athanasiou.

In this brief contribution there is no need to give an explanation on why this study engages our critical discourse; rather it is about how to utilize it, being aware of the limits of our most convinced ways of knowing, articulating and acting. In a deliberative gesture of ethical and political reflection that maintains both tension and theoretical bonding of respect while performing the realm of a new critical activity, Judith Butler allowed for the 'Performative Theory of Assembly' to take place on the scene, in the auditorium of the Cultural Centre in the heart of Belgrade.

The presence of the constant transposition of the modalities of theme that seek the political within a neoliberal contemporaneity and countering it at the same time, while aiming to expose through the possibilities of public assembly, or more precisely, through its, as the author says, "responsibilization" (Butler 2015: 15), moved my aspiration towards a simple claim for public agency. What stands behind this claim and to what does it obligate us?

Apart from various provocative thoughts and convincing arguments on bodily and embodied assembly in public spaces that re-configure the political, I will draw attention to the potency for the politicality of assembly from a very distinct angle. Namely, by referring to the syntagm 'We are *still* the people' (Butler 2015: 181) that Butler addressed precisely as a response to a "historical articulation of urgency," disclosed as a need to oppose the acceleration of precarity and economic inequality of humans, I will try to rethink what we keep by recreating the exterior of human-ness.

On the one hand, what to connect within providing us the people today, in this repetitive claim "We are *still* the people", that allows us to think whether humanness might be the ultimate bonding, or the condition of being human; on the other hand, in which way does this declaration resonate in the formation of public assembly by claiming for the shape of human possibility as its condition? In order to see an intrinsic link between these two concerns, one has to make an additional effort rather than a switch in perspective.

This so-called phrase 'We are *still* the people' is present in the book even when it is not expressly mentioned, through the webs of other thoughts, concepts, questions, imaginative positions, always signalizing something that goes beyond enunciation itself, or its "vocalized performative" (Butler 2015: 170). What thus thrilled me at first glance was not the problematic *we*, or even more problematic syntagm '*we* as the people', or 'we are the people', rather the unexpected meanings that *still* implies and creates.

"It can mean, 'we are *still* the people' – therefore, still persisting and not yet destroyed" (Butler 2015: 181), as Butler pleads for one of the possible interpretations, by highlighting equality as a matrix of public constituency gathered around an assumed yet indefinable "the commons" that is to be jointly struggled for. While I must admit the point that embodied equality through a public assembly linked to human interdependency and "a fair distribution of labour tasks" (ibid.) as an 'inquiry' involuntarily implies other political claims upon bodily agencies under the conditions of neoliberal governing and its reshaping and defracting of the concept of "the commons" today, I would argue that this abovementioned syntagm elicits a response on another level.

What I found to be most significant is that 'being *still* the people' invokes the possibility of enabling and creating a human zone at, paradoxically, the very

edge of the human zone itself and despite ethical disputes around human subjectivity, political agency and popular sovereignty. Subaltern, subjugated, oppressed, marginalized, "banned" as the one Other-ed, or the one whose being is "necessary prerequisite exclusion for sovereign inclusion" (Nayar 2010: 5) have confronted and occupied our gaze.

Hence at this point we are precisely talking about the condition of governing human life as a political subject-citizen as governing life itself that is at the present time, according to some decolonial theorists and critical thinkers (Mbembe, Beller, Gržinić, Berardi etc.), marked through necropolitical practices for the greatest extent. Based rather on the "distribution of death" (Mbembe 2003: 24) than on the "fair distribution of labor tasks," they produced a capitalization of death since, as Marina Gržinić argued "(…) the logic is not the maximum of life but the minimum for living (…)" (2013: 7). In the strict sense, it is the logic of how the global capitalist social body is organized (Gržinić 2008, internet) and "how *racially* ontologized hierarchies of space" (McIntyre, Nast 2011:1466) in convergence with this expose the modes of production of life.

95

When the Swiss visual artist Ursula Biemann, for example, in her video essay project *Performing the Border* (2000: 133-144) explored the spaces provided by the unrestricted movement of capital and labour power within neoliberal capitalism, she introduced the notion of "geobodies" as a peculiar metaphor for mobile factories that rely on the exploiting regime of women's bodies that serve capital there, especially concentrated on the border and around the border. This geobodies trajectory operates very efficiently in various countries, increasingly mapping spaces for bare survival both for female migrants and local 'immobile', subaltern women based on providing a bias that enhances cheap and overexploited labour and enforces work under slave-like and subhuman conditions, along with exploitation and over-subjugation. Migrant women workers from respective 'marked' states or regions (such as Southeast Asia) have very often lived under border conditions and at the border of living bodies whose neo-slavery position emerges out of invasive neoliberal strategies that often intersect with "racialized nationalism and disjunctive morale economies based on kinship and ethnicity" (Ong 2009: 160). Therefore, "biopolitical otherness," a term used by Aihwa Ong (2009: 161), contains the implications of all these moments in their "otherness status," from precarious non-human status to noncitizen one, from colonised body to dehumanised subjectivity.

How can we then make a claim for political acting knowing that any attentiveness to the substantive harms of human discrimination and subjugation within the public field cannot be realized if the intentional ignorance of human beings, who have been forced to live under extreme conditions and substantially de-humanized is at risk? How can we then struggle "for a world

in which life becomes livable for those who have not yet been valued as living beings?" (Butler 2015: 183). These kinds of questions may leave us in a state of human anxiety or caught by 'ontological' melancholia.

Or going further, whether the possibility of human assembly in reminding us of what 'still the people' is, means an ultimate condition of acting as being, or rather a kind of transformative compassion among humans through modes of social reciprocity and recognition, and above all, solidarity (Berlant 2011: 182). Enrique Dussel, in advocating for the stand that "life is the only absolute moment in all ethical and political description" (Dussel 2013), starts from a material ethics of the affirmation of life as a form of counteracting in favor of those who are poor, oppressed, and hyper-exploited, and seemingly, by this, opens up towards an initial proposal of possible engagement. However, a new modality of 'the political', in order to activate a critical positioning and acting, rests on this agonistic 'burden' as well on the capacity of 'humanistic resistance' (Said's term) that the still enigmatic 'We are *still* the people' implies and offers. And as I presume, just as Judith Butler notes in this book, on "radical hope."

Jasmina Husanović

(Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tuzla)
jasminamak@gmail.com

I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to take part in this seminar, since I have had the pleasure to engage closely with Judith Butler's thought in my research, teaching and activism in the past decades. My questions and comments concerning Butler's latest work *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Butler 2015) stem from the experiences of academic, artistic and activist work in Bosnia and Herzegovina where traumatic common corporeal injuries and predicaments have been normalized and institutionalized for a long time, through the war in the 1990s as well as in the so-called 'post-Dayton' period. For more than two decades the twin logic of ethnonationalist and neoliberal governance of affect and abject in Bosnia and Herzegovina has resulted in a particular set of ways governing 'human waste' through normalized terror (Husanović 2015; 2014a), or „terror as usual" (Taussig 1992). I think it would be very interesting to discuss several issues in Butler's latest book from the perspective that takes into account the lessons of protests and plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, especially in terms of political strategies and infrastructural challenges of direct democracy and social revolt as I have analyzed elsewhere (Husanović 2014b).

I was particularly impressed with the insistence in Butler's book on the necessities of producing and reproducing the actual infrastructural conditions for politics – for political expression, subjectivization and action. In this sense, I think that such material experiences of precarious subjectivities

caught in multiple and complex emergencies affecting our politics, labor and thought today must be understood as a matter of engaged political enterprise on the battleground for the social body and public good today. To play with some metaphors from Pierre Bourdieu's opus and go beyond them (Bourdieu 1990: 3), "a fieldwork in philosophy" today has to be about producing knowledge as "a martial art" honed through political antagonization and common struggles in new social movements around us. Our battle is against the politics of terror which through its "irregular rhythms of numbing and shock" constitutes "the apparent normality of the abnormal created by the state of emergency" (Taussig 1992: 12). This, however, implies a quantum leap in the degrees and forms of creative and risk-taking work to be under-taken when resisting normalized terror, whilst firmly set on the tracks of the politics of hope, solidarity and equality, in the horizon of social change and justice. It is a daunting endeavor to forge, at the very heart of this po-litical knowledge enterprise, a critical distance from emergency-induced hysteria, numbness or acceptance, and against resentment, envy, nostalgia, melancholia and despair as predominant affective mechanisms of the cul-turalized neoliberal governance.

97

For instance, there is a tendency to interpret the latest events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which emerged as an amalgam of performative assemblies and street protests spreading from Tuzla throughout the country, as coming about suddenly, "out of nowhere," whereas actually they were the outcome of a nexus of long-term emancipatory practices and movements that have been nesting in the fields of social activism, critical pedagogies, knowledge production and are there for many years. These practices and collectives have been questioning and challenging the merging of ethnocorporate and neoliberal regimes of power and violence in their particular post-atrocity order of governance instituted in Bosnia and Herzegovina for more than twenty years, colonizing all spaces of publicity and everyday life. The culture of terror, trauma and exception that is embedded in the so-called „transi-tional justice" industry exposes political and economic orders where all lives, life as a whole, feeds into the "ethnicity incorporated" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). From what has happened in the social revolt engulfing Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, and in the period afterwards, there emerges not a context-specific, but a common and universalizing imperative everywhere in global politics – to create, invent and nurture new modes of struggle against inequality and reclaim the tools, or the means of production neces-sary for such political enterprise. The question of solidarity seems of para-mount importance here.

In this sense, what strikes me as a particularly significant insight in Butler's latest work is the argument that claims of identification with someone's predicament are not to be equated with solidarity, or what would be politi-cally productive solidarity (Butler 2015). In addition to this, there is a call

there to move away from, and abandon the attempts to generalize or universalize cultural identifications in political thought and action. In my opinion, this directly speaks to the need to turn towards the question of class antagonisms, and to take class as a key category of analysis and political mobilization. This, of course, includes the sphere of knowledge production, which is also marked by class antagonisms and deeply unequal and unjust political economies. Speaking about the field of knowledge production through the critique of its political economy underneath also equips us to go beyond not only this false dichotomy between 'intellectuals' and 'activists', but also those equally false or docile claims that academic work, however critical, is enough for the political enterprise we have to engage in current political circumstances and our lives. We could witness how the field of knowledge production populated with many social actors and their transformative practices in a specific setting can foster promising political interventions, such as performative assemblies or street protests, by actively producing and reproducing the infrastructure, the tools, the means of political protest in deteriorating circumstances. I would like to place emphasis on those particular affective mechanisms which underpin the neoliberal/ethnonationalist colonial political economies rampant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which clearly indicate the collusion and complicity of local and international elites and ideological orders they fodder.

Within the constraints of this seminar, I have chosen to pose a couple of specific questions concerning the arguments in the book. The first one is about the relationship between violence and nonviolence, especially when referring to Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (Benjamin 1986). The second one refers to the paradox or crevice between fear and hope. This is something I am quite concerned about, considering that the possibility of future performative public assemblies is severely curtailed by the ever-stronger reorganization and preparation of state orders and their repressive forces to contain and prevent civic protest in any shape or form, using increasing levels of violence and inducing and disseminating fear through the social fabric and social body. What also concerns me is the saturation of various instantiations of socialist, social democratic, radical democratic, as well as liberal political scholarship and activism with a series of platitudes, withdrawals and complacencies about political organization today, often amounting to something that resembles a peculiar solipsism of passion, which deadens the potential to think and act politically, which evades the urge to embody passionate subjectivities collectively. In this sense, it seems to me that the problems and weaknesses in the field of knowledge production are largely to do with the refusal to engage in actually producing the public space, with its infrastructure, to orchestrate public resistance, protest and transformation. I think we lack enough discussion on how we, as knowledge producers, embody individually or collectively the symptoms of alienation on the affective level,

through the reproduction of affective bodily states of defeat, depression, mistrust, faint-heartedness, cynicism, hopelessness, and so on. Perhaps the right slogan at this moment of facing the politics of terror of inequality anew is to wish upon ourselves much more of everything that is already too much for us, because when things get truly unbearable, radical hope and the drive to change such things seem to ground themselves in new and promising forms.

To sum up the questions: How should we position ourselves towards violence in the context of bodies occupying public space and claiming public good that need to navigate the paradox between fear and hope, through bodily vulnerability, especially because the crevice between the two seems to be rather difficult to think and act upon? What kind of affective fiber is necessary to take on productively those political strategies that blur or displace the distinction between violence and nonviolence, and dominant normative prescriptions that go along with it?

Judith Butler
Responses to Nikola Petković, Biljana Kašić and Jasmina Husanović

Thank you very much. There are again so many important points here, and I just want to thank you for elaborating your questions in the ways that you have.

The situation in the US academy in which claims of identity are put forward is a very difficult one, and I think it does sometimes produce an ethnographic shock on the part of those who travel to US campuses and see how the logical political identity gets reproduced in ways that are quite antagonistic and that produce rupture time and again. I think that's right. I don't know if I would call them special interests, I think that's the term that the Republican Party uses in order to talk about women – that means half the population has "special interests", it's not the general will, they make a distinction between what is a special interest and who is the general public. Anybody who is marked by gender is a "special interest." But still, there's a really big question here how to deal with that marking and how does it emerge in political discourse. Maybe we could slip forward and remember that absolute identification with another, that is, being able to completely and utterly take the place of another in whatever it is they have suffered, or in whatever it is they struggle for, is not a possibility, and certainly not a basis of solidarity, it cannot be. And I think, for instance, comparative genocide studies has done some really important work about exactly what can be said, how we establish a dialogue on atrocity, a dialogue on mass death, how we establish a dialogue on the technologies of state-sponsored murder. All those questions are really important to think about in common, even though many of us come to these issues from very different historical

circumstances. I think that there are better ways of doing that, but something like that strikes me as closer to a model of solidarity I'm interested in.

I do think that we are still the people, whoever is standing there or here, whoever is part of the larger network of support. There is this *deictic* moment where I'm pointing to those of us who are assembled – whoever we happen to be, as if to say, "we have not yet been eradicated." That does not mean that others have not been eradicated, indeed the reason we can say that we are still the people is that we know very well that others are no longer the people, or that they are dead, or dying, or they are at risk of death, or expelled or imprisoned, having lost some substantial access to the rights of citizenship. There is a very important relationship between memorialization and assembly that we haven't really thought about today, but which I know has been part of the Women in Black movement. Asserting the grievability of lives that have been lost, marking them, naming them in common, is not necessarily a monumental form of mourning, but more simply a set of practices of public acknowledgment that become reiterated throughout public space and time – that is a crucial feature of many public assemblies. The political power of mourning is evident, in Palestine, where it is sometimes difficult to know what is a funeral and what is a protest. And I know that this happens in many places, I know that Assad used to, perhaps still does, shoot at the Syrian people who gathered to mourn those who were killed by his army. He clearly feared the potential of an uprising on the part of those who gathered together to mourn. I think that the question of grievability and marking grievability is one way to transform the idea of human waste into valuable life, or grievable life – livable life is the aspiration of the still living, grievable life is the entitlement of the dead, or those who are on the way towards death. I think the fact that we are still the people marks the fact that we could be destroyed, some of us have been destroyed, and in that face of actual destruction we are still here, assembled, but also exposing ourselves in a way that every assembly does to the proximate and possible force of destruction.

The particular political situation of "transitional justice" is clearly an important one, a chance for a "diagonal" or "transversal" analysis that would consider post-genocidal, post-dictatorial, and decolonized conditions, but also apartheid and occupation (we are not yet post-occupation and on some analyses, apartheid continues in new forms). All of these histories are histories of enormous state violence. What is the place of critical memory studies in relation to the dominant and official versions of history, and even the sorts of narrative forms of a life-story required by non-governmental organizations and international law? Allied with this question is another, namely, what is the specific harm of normalizing trauma? And what happens under regimes that understand themselves as post-atrocity, or that have normalized unspeakable losses, or even capitalized on their unspeakability. I have a great deal to learn

about how neo-liberalism has entered into the process of "rebuilding" the Balkans, and how NGO discourse has imposed a language on trauma that effaces those that have emerged from the very people who have undergone violence and loss of such magnitude. And I'm interested to hear that there are a number of practices, including art practices and critical pedagogy that are part of the knowledge production that seeks to interrupt, or call into question, the post-atrocity order of government. That seems crucial. And I think there is also a way of bringing that forward.

I recently visited the *Centro Conti* in Buenos Aires where they of course have given a great deal of thought to memorializing those who have disappeared or explicitly killed. They make a distinction between sensationalist representations in museums dedicated to telling and documenting histories of violence and those that actually work with a pedagogical aim, and which also allow for a spatial organization of memory, such that one can pass in and out of the sites of torture and have time for reflection. This latter does not "sanitize" but neither does it seek to "retraumatize" or overwhelm those who wish to pass through those spaces. I think as well that such sites are important not only for the way they memorialize, but also for how they teach, and then again for the possibility to emerge with a new view on the ethics and politics of non-violence. I'm interested in critical memory studies in that respect, but I also think that there are comparative and transnational projects that are dealing with that, in ways that are really important. I also agree that fiscal elites and their state allies are very interested in suppressing civilian protest and expanding the military functions of the police. It did strike me as quite horrible that the French government, in establishing a state of emergency, not only suspended the freedom of assembly, but identified the climate change conference as the one in relationship to which there shall be no demonstration. So, a very tactical, very political use of the state of emergency to quell civilian protest. At the time of this re-editing, the Turkish government has instigated legal action against academic in Turkey who signed a "peace petition" in an effort to establish a better understanding with the Kurds. The call to peace has become punishable.

101

Perhaps I have one last thing to say about depression, melancholy and hopelessness – themes that we have spoken about during these days. One of the features of neoliberalism that is most nefarious is that we are each held responsible for the suffering we undergo, we expected to "bounce back" and to show a form of resilience that is part of the entrepreneurial spirit of self-making. This manic imperative corresponds to the classic melancholic and depressive position. Mania is the inverse side of melancholia, and so part of its own logic. The self-punishing side of melancholia is more well-known: one imagines oneself to be the sole source of one's suffering – one didn't try hard enough to find or keep a job, one didn't put oneself on the market often enough, one didn't prepare for the market well enough, one didn't learn how

to show or demonstrate one's capacities, etc. One didn't sell oneself well enough. But I do think that sometimes, when we find ourselves falling into complete pessimism, from which we can find no exit, maybe it's because we let our suffering become too private, that we've allowed the suffering to become too individual, in other words: we follow the neo-liberal imperative to produce oneself with very few resources in the midst of devastation. The alternative before us would be to identify the common elements and even the structuring conditions that reproduce us in our isolated suffering, trying to obey a manic imperative we know to be impossible. So, moving out of that isolation, I do believe – it may start with commiseration and a sense of relief that one is not alone, but it may become something more, a thinking and acting in concert articulates a different kind of sociality that may well remind us of the limits of individualism and our common power.

102

References

Arendt, Hannah (1958), *Human Condition*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah (1993), „Crisis in Culture" in *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books.

Arendt, Hannah (1977), *Life of the Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Arendt, Hannah (1989), *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah (2003), *Responsibility and Judgment* Jerome Kohn (ed.) New York: Schocken books.

Badiou, Alain (2006), *Metapolitics*, London: Verso.

Bakhtin, M. Mikhail (1975/1982), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays,* Texas: University of Texas Press.

Barát, Erzsébet (2015), „Les-being and Identity-Politics: The Intersectionality of Sexual Identity and Desire", in Erna Appelt, Elisabeth Grabner-Niel, Marion Jarosch, Michaela Ralser (eds.), *Identitätenverhandeln – Identitäten de/konstruieren. Innsbrucker Gender Lectures III,* Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 151–174.

Barát, Erzsébet (2011), „Queer in Hungary: Hate speech regulation. Queering the speech/conduct binary", in Lisa Downing, Robert Gillet (eds) *Queer in Europe: Contemporary Case Studies,* London: Ashgate, 85–98.

Beiner, Ronald (1989), „Interpretative Essay" in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Benjamin, Walter (1986), „Critique of Violence", in *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, New York: Shocken Books, pp. 277–300.

Brown, Wendy (2015), *Undoing Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York: Zone Books.

Berlant, Lauren (2011), *Cruel Optimism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Biemann, Ursula (2000), „Performing the Border. On Gender, transnational bodies, and technology", in *Been there and back to nowhere, postproduction documents 1988–2000*. Berlin: b_book, pp. 133–144.

Biemann, Ursula, „World Sex Work Archive (1998–2003)", (internet), available at: www. geobodies.org (viewed 12 December 2014).

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990). *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Buden, Boris (2009), *Zonen des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*, Frankfurt A/M: Suhrkamp.

Butler, Judith (2015), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.* Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press.

Butler, Judith, Athansiou, Athena (2013), *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. London: Polity.

Butler, Judith (2012), *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism.* New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press.

Butler Judith, Spivak, Gayatri (2007), *Who Sings the Nation-State?*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Butler, Judith (2004), *Precarious Life.* London, New York: Verso.

Butler, Judith (1993), *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex',* New York & London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble.* New York London: Routledge.

Comaroff, John L. and Comaroff, Jean (2009), *Ethnicity, Inc.*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2006) *Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso.

Dussel, Enrique, (2013), „The Philosophy of Liberation: An Interview with Enrique Dussel (Part II)„ *Naked Punch*, an interview by Mahvish Ahmad, (internet), available at: http://nakedpunch.com/articles/193 (viewed 8 January 2016).

Ettinger, Bracha L. (2006a), „From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besidedness, and the Three Primal Mother-Phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment", *Athena: Filosofijos studijos* 2: 100–135.

Ettinger, Bracha L. (2006b), „What Would Eurydice Say?: Emanuel Levinas in Conversation with Bracha L. Ettinger", *Athena: Filosofijos studijos* 2: 137–145.

Ettinger, Bracha L. (2011), „Uncanny Awe, Uncanny Compassion and Matrixial Transjectivity beyond Uncanny Anxiety", *French Literature Series* 38 (1): 1–30.

Gržinić, Marina (2008), „Euro-Slovenian Necrocapitalism", *Transversal* 2, (internet), available at: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0208/grzinic/en (viewed 10 January 2015).

Gržinić, Marina, (2013)"A Refugee Protest Camp in Vienna And the European Union's Processes of Racialization, Seclusion, and Discrimination", *e-flux journal* 43, (internet), available at: http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-refugee-protest-camp-in-vienna-and-the-european-union%E2%80%99s-processes-of-racialization-seclusion-and-discrimination (viewed 10 January 2016).

Honig, Bonnie (1992), „Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity" in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political.* New York, London: Routledge.

Husanović, Jasmina (2015), „Governance of life and femininity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Reflections on affective politics and cultural production", in *Genre and the (Post-)Communist Woman. Analyzing transformations of the Central and Eastern European female ideal*, eds. Florentina C. Andreescu and Michael J. Shapiro, New York: Routledge, pp. 115–132.

Husanović, Jasmina (2014a), „Resisting the Culture of Trauma as the Politics of Terror in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Emancipatory Lessons for/in Cultural and Knowledge Production", in *Narratives of Justice In and Out of the Courtroom,* eds. D. Zarkov and M. Glasius, Springer International Publishing, pp. 147–162.

Husanović, Jasmina (2014b), „Traumatic Knowledge in Action: Scrapbooking Plenum Events, Fermenting Revolt", in *Unbribable Bosnia and Herzegovina*, ed. Damir Arsenijević. Baden-Baden, Nomos, pp. 145–153.

Johnson Reagon, Bernice (2000), „Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). Kitchen Table Women of Color Press; Rutgers University Press.

103

Kant, Immanuel (1969), *The Critique of Judgment.* Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Mbembe, Achille (2003), „Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15(1): 11–40.

McIntyre, Michael and Nast, Heidi, J. (2011), „Bio(necro)polis: Marx, Surplus Populations, and the Spatial Dialectics of Reproduction and Race", *Antipode,* 43(5): 1465–1488.

Nayar, Jayan (2010), „Thinking from the Ban? Rebellious Third Worlds and Theory", (internet) available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1693827 (viewed 9 November 2015).

Nowotny, Helga (2016), *The Cunning of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity.

Ong, Aihwa (2009), „A Bio-Cartography: Maids, Neoslavery, and NGOs", in *Migrations and Mobilities: Citizenship, Borders, and Gender*. New York and London: New York University Press, pp. 157–185.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1994), *Discourse on the origin of inequality*. Franklin Philip (trans.), Patrick Coleman (ed.), Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Runciman, Garry W. (2005), *Pluralism and the Personality of the State*, London, New York: Cambridge.

Skinner, Quentin (1998), *Liberty Before Liberalism*, London, New York: Cambridge.

Taussig, Michael (1992), „Terror As Usual: Walter Benjamin's Theory of History As State of Siege" in *The Nervous System*, London: Routledge, pp. 11–35.

Villa, Dana (1999), „Thinking and Judging" in Joke Hermsen & Dana Villa (eds.) *The Judge and the Spectator.* Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, pp. 9–29.

Wolin, Sheldon (1994), „Fugitive Democracy". *Constellations*, Vol. 1, No 1.

Zerilli, Linda (2005), *The Abyss of Freedom.* Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Zerilli, Linda (2009), „Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment", *Signs* 34/2: 295–317.

Zerilli, Linda (2011) „The Practice of Judgment: Hannah Arendt's Copernican Revolution", in Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (eds.) *Theory after Theory*. London: Routledge, pp. 120–132.