Adriana Zaharijević

In conversation with Judith Butler: Binds yet to be settled

Judith Butler is well-known as feminist, gender and queer theorist. She is probably the most widely acclaimed woman in philosophy, which was recognized not only by her great readership, but also by many awards, such as Theodor Adorno Preis awarded to her in 2012. However, Judith Butler has not dedicated her work solely to critical theory: she is also a human rights activist, and the staunch advocate of anti-war politics, non-violence and radical democratic principles.

Butler came to Belgrade as the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory's honorary guest in November 2015. She gave a lecture on 'Vulnerability and resistance', followed by an intensive seminar on her newest book, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. On that occasion we began this exchange which centred very much on her recent conceptual framework. 2015 was an important year because it marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Gender Trouble*, the book that has most notably changed the course of gender and sexuality studies. That book had also had tremendous impact on how women's and gender studies were framed in post-Yugoslav region – suffice it to say that it has been translated in Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia. The fact that Butler's work which did not revolve around gender has been much less known, prompted this interview to focus on politicality of vulnerability, precarity and dispossession, the cornerstones of her political and ethical theory. Questions put forward make linkages with gender which 'is still there'; they ask what kind of human can we claim to defend in times of post-humanism and relentless production of human capital; when freedom, equality and livability work together; and how to argue for non-violence and act non-violently in the amidst of so many forms of violence. The interview took place immediately after Paris and Beirut killings, which was to some extent captured by its tone and by its aspiration to understand the limits of what is politically impossible to will. The impossibility of leading a good life in bad life informed Butler's answers, with her constant readiness to make us think and will differently, to make us understand our obligation to co-habit the earth together on terms of equality.

Adriana Zaharijević: „Ethical and political responsibility emerges when a sovereign and unitary subject can be effectively challenged" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: ix), this sentence from *Dispossession* reminded

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me – although the terms are different – of the beginning of *Gender Trouble*. Now, 25 years after its publication, how would you explain its reverberations in your later work?

Judith Butler: In general, I do not try to connect the earlier work with the more recent work. I accept that there are connections, and it seems that you just found one. I tend to start again and again, which does not mean that each time, I start *de novo*. Maybe the same issues get raised in different contexts – gender, war, precarity, censorship – and they get folded into new contexts. But it was never my intention to produce a systematic or internally coherent system of thought. I continue to think with the resources I have. That includes Hegel, for instance, but also feminist theory.

AZ: However, in *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, you do dedicate the whole second chapter to gender. It seems that your earlier interest in gender performativity fits perfectly in performative theory of assembly.

JB: I do not know if it fits perfectly. It seems to me that *Gender Trouble*, for instance, did not sufficiently think about social and political actions, those that emerge from collective movements, and it did not offer a way to think about social relations or sociality. The way it was sometimes interpreted as a form of individualism or even neo-liberal individualism was a problem for me, and I needed to rethink performativity within plurality. Arendt helped me to do that, even though her notions of the social are finally not adequate.

AZ: It may be said that during the last ten years, three notions frame your work: precarity, vulnerability, and to a lesser extent dispossession. They are obviously different, but are also interlocked. All of them appear as double-sensed, with two interdependent valences. How to want one and not want the other valence?

JB: Perhaps we can say that these are issues that have to be thought at various levels, and that we cannot expect to say „yes“ or „no“ to any of them. They are not positions for which one argues only on a normative basis: I say „yes“ or „no“ to precarity. We have to find out first what they are, and how they operate, and then perhaps we have a better idea of what can be affirmed or negated at a normative level. My sense is that the insufficiency of the sovereign subject has to be understood in various ways. It is not simply that sovereignty is a fantasy that is time and again defeated by a principle of „lack“ – that kind of explanation produces a formal solution that is insensitive to historical context, or finds in historical context a convenient occasion to assert its trans-historical validity. At least with dispossession and vulnerability, the

double-edged character of the condition is part of what it is. On the one hand, one requires vulnerability but also to be „outside of oneself", delivered over to a world of others, establishing sexual, social, and ethical modes of relationality. On the other hand, it is precisely by virtue of this kind of condition that we become subject to exploitation.

Precarity is different, since we have to distinguish between socially induced forms of precarity and those that characterize mortal and injure-able existence, human and creaturely. It is by virtue of the latter that we are eligible for forms of suffering. If we live in an area that is flooded, like New Orleans was some years ago, and certain populations are quickly moved to safety, and other populations are left to die, then we have a natural disaster to which we are subject as human creatures, but the way that we undergo that natural disaster is determined in part by failed infrastructure, social and racial inequality, and a biopolitics of population management. We can barely distinguish the two moments as they are lived together, but they do become distinct as clearly as we see how the power differential works in establishing lives worth saving, and lives not worth saving. The metric of valuable life operates throughout.

AZ: The notion that binds those three terms is certainly the notion of the human. You seem to ask the one and the same question for more than two decades: what or who counts as human? And, by inference, what kind of human is constituted as inhuman or less than human? We now know that being human is a cross-over of matrices of possessive individualism, phallocentrism (or sexism), colonial expansionism, racial hierarchies and heteronormativity. Can this notion of the human ever be recovered and recuperated from its genealogies, so contaminated with different and overlapping kinds of in-humanness?

JB: This is a good question, an important question. I think we cannot give up on the idea of the human. At the same time, we cannot become „humanist" in any of the conventional senses attached to that term. On the one hand, the human is crafted through all the norms that you mention and so „contaminated" with forms of power that are objectionable. The human works not as a foundation, but as a criterion for recognition. On the other hand, precisely because there are those who have not yet been recognized as human, or whose recognition would „break" the category, we have to keep it in place precisely to understand its historical changes, and the vector of power that works through it. When we claim that certain kinds of violence and atrocity are „inhuman" we are surely saying that we do not want those kinds of crimes to be part of what we affirm as the human. So we are implicated in a debate at that moment. Similarly, even as the human/animal distinction has been used to establish racial hierarchies among humans,

and so requires a critique of „bestialization", it is also important to count humans as one sort of animal, a creature among creatures. These kinds of binds are not yet settled.

AZ: In order to really appreciate interdependency, dispossession and vulnerability, to appreciate them *as* political, we would have to think of them outside of the logic of possession. We would also need to think of acting as of something other than mastery, and of actor as other than sovereign. What is this kind of politics that challenges sovereignty and property that I am and that I have? And is there such a politics that can effectively bring them to an end?

JB: Oh, „bring them to an end" – that would be a fine idea, a fine goal! I am perhaps too stuck in history to plot a course toward the elimination of the property form and the conceits of sovereign possession. Perhaps we have to consider those practices that effectively do undermine them, and to build those forms of kinship, community, and solidarity that effectively dispute the necessity and value of sovereignty and possession. I would like to see new ways of thinking about public space and the „commons" – not so much what we „own" in common, but what we share or circulate in common. This happens usually outside of the structure of states, in civil society, or in non-authorized modes of sociability. But perhaps it is possible to think about a different kind of state structure that would divide up or disperse sovereignty. I have always thought that was a good model for understanding what a bi-national authority might look like in Palestine.

AZ: Can you tell something more about the non-authorized modes of sociability? In times when the Left opts for much grander solutions, those „queer modalities" of sociability, if I understood you correctly, also came under attack as insufficient and fragmentary. How do you assess these kinds of critiques?

JB: My sense is that whatever large legal and political efforts are made to establish rights or even to establish political parties on the left – and for the queer left, in particular – they have to come from popular struggles that cannot be fully translated into legal reform or party politics. I think it is probably a mistake to think that one has to choose between local movements and initiatives and „larger" structural and institutional political participation. They are dependent upon one another, and they constitute different modalities of the political. If a party loses contact with its „base" it becomes part of a machinery, so it requires the pre- and extra-parliamentary field of politics for its own legitimacy. Similarly, if we disregard the need to gain significant power, even becoming part of governments, then we really do keep ourselves in a mode of self-righteous marginalization. So I guess I refuse

the distinction between the „fragmentary" queer politics and the „mainstream" left – which is usually recruiting LGBT rather than queer. I think the dynamism, the antagonism, between them is extremely valuable.

AZ: You once said that the day of public intellectual is gone (Butler 2012). Would you connect this in some way with your understanding of a necessity to become dispossessed of a sovereign self? What then a public intellectual does? Do we need to redefine the term itself?

JB: I think the idea of the „public intellectual" is an individualist notion. It assumes that there are heroic individuals who courageously speak out, who engaged in powerful speech and stand for important values, and that they do this because of internal conviction or special moral or linguistic capacities. But such individuals are shaped and made in the context of informal or formal social movements. They are supported by hundreds or thousands of others who are „there" in some sense as those individuals speak. They are not separated from the social and historical conditions of their emergence, of their very possibility.

AZ: Linked to this question: In *Dispossession* especially, but also after the many lectures when you are careful to answer all the questions and to leave room for their differences and intonations, there seem to be many „I'm not sure" and „It seems to me" (rather than I argue, I claim, all those figurative speech acts that confirm sovereignty of the author in the contemporary academia, in whichever discipline). The process of questioning is obviously not only about getting rid of what has been already there in order to give some alternative, but positive answer. It is also about not being sure what there is to be given as an answer. I was wondering if this has to do only with some sort of academic or even philosophical decency, or does it point to something else? For example, the possibility of opening up the space for something monstrous, both terrifying and incoherent, contrary to seamless: full of seams!? (And doing this today, when there are expectations to offer ready answers, even more, solutions applicable in different dimensions of our everyday struggles, which seems even harder…)

JB: I do not mean to be playful by saying, „I am not sure" in response to your question, but the truth is, I do not always know. Sometimes I only know what I am willing to say in the course of saying and revising. I accept the idea that sometimes thought is fabricated through speech, and that it is only by letting a set of words loose in public that we start to get a sense of what they mean. I realize that I sometimes commit myself to more than I mean to, and other times I say less about what really matters to me. So I am, as it were, in the midst of finding myself in speech with others, and that is part of what conversation is. It also gives us perhaps a concrete example of what it means to be constituted in the midst of sociality.

AZ: When I asked you about the perils of possessive individualism, I omitted its contemporary form – what Wendy Brown defines as human capital in her new book, *Undoing the Demos* (2015). This also brings us back to the issue of the human in times of neoliberalism, in terms of normalisation of poverty and precarity.

JB: Human capital is one way of thinking about the value of the human self. Both Wendy Brown and Michel Feher have been tracking the way that „self-appreciation" has become a new form of the neo-liberal subject. We are, effectively, assets that can be promoted on the market, and market-rationality has suffused our way of thinking both about self and other. This is different from self-ownership, since the self is constantly marketing itself. It has become not so much a piece of property, but an assemblage of „assets" that appreciate or depreciate depending on their market value. It is difficult to find values that exceed this framework, but part of what I am trying to do is to think about how the forms of precarity produced by neo-liberalism also have led to new forms of sociality. These would distinct from, and opposed to, that neo-liberal form of the subject.

AZ: This is the proper place to turn to your *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. There you argue that precarity becomes „a site of alliance" (Butler 2015: 27)? This point links your earlier preoccupations against identity politics and your newer readings of what it means to live together, across differences.

JB: Yes, I always thought of „queer", for example, as a term that designated a loose alliance, not a party, not a club, but a network, an emerging and possibly transient movement. And I learned a great deal from other networks that have emerged over time, those against globalization and corporate power, but also against racism. I am also interested in what brings people together more or less spontaneously. What common indignation? It seems to me that one could suffer the condition quite privately. One could assume „responsibility" for one's debts, or the foreclosure of one's home. But that would be precisely not to have a political understanding of profits, banks, and neo-liberal forms of rationality. It is once the structural and shared character of the condition comes to the fore that assemblies and alliances become possible.

AZ: The questions of equality and freedom (and how those two can remain together, how not to lose one at the expense of the other) have a prominent place in this book. Freedom, as you define it, is closely related to its *exercise*, something which Foucault also emphasized. But unlike him, you claim that freedom does not come from you or me, but „from the bond we make at the moment in which we exercise freedom together",

without which, moreover, there is no freedom at all (Butler 2015: 88). Can you say something more about that, and also about the intrinsic relation between freedom and equality?

JB: It is unclear to me from where freedom comes for Foucault. But it seems to be something that emerges in the operation of critique, at the limit of regulatory power, or in zones that escape disciplinary power. Maybe as well he has an idea of market freedom in his work on neo-liberalism, but that is contested among scholars. I do think Hannah Arendt gives us an idea of freedom that emerges within politics, and it emerges not from me or from you, but from an enacted relationship between us, a relation that is formed through action. As much as I like the sociality of that view, I also worry that she subscribes to a romantic idea of unconditioned action. Some Arendt scholars disagree with me. Still, I think we need to think more strongly about the kinds of support called upon in acting together, especially when we live in a world in which those very supports are diminishing. The „we" in Arendt is also a function of equality. That is a hopeful yet complicated claim.

AZ: We may claim that freedom and equality are only important if the lives of those who are presumably free and equal also live liveable lives. The past struggles which sought to institutionalise equality or freedom differ from our own struggles when both of these are in some sense there. And yet, the unlivability has not been eradicated or diminished.

JB: It is difficult to introduce the idea of „livability" into political discourse because there is an immediate question about what standards might be used to decide whether or not a life is livable. One could just become exasperated with this demand for a standard or measure that would help us distinguish livable from unlivable lives, and simply rejoin that people are quite capable of indicating when life becomes unlivable. Of course, that may be true, but it does not suffice as an answer. I think „livability" has to do with having proper support, and that includes the economic condition of persisting in life, and in reproducing the material conditions of life. Shelter, food, employment all count here. At the same time, certain kinds of freedoms, such as assembly, mobility, and expression, are also part of livability. It can be unlivable not to be able to speak or to speak out. I don't want „livability" to be a category that we add to freedom, equality, and justice. Perhaps we have to understand that those three important democratic principles have to be understood concretely in light of the question of what makes for a livable life. The latter is a normative conception of what is needed to live, and to live with some sense of support and some sense of future. The problem is that so many lives are now made unlivable because of accelerating inequalities and massive dispossession. These are only two conditions among many. But I think we have to ask this question in order

to situate the fundamental principles of democracy within social and political life as it is lived or as it is found to be unlivable.

It is an old philosophical question: is life worth living or is only the good life worth living. Now the question may be different: is life worth living when it is not livable? Perhaps it is possible to say that some people are alive, but wish not to be, or feel that life under certain economic and political conditions is not worth living. Socrates asked that former question, under what conditions is life worth living? He distinguished between necessary and sufficient conditions. We can reformulate that question now. When people begin to feel that they are part of a „dispensable" population, how do they struggle to find and assert the value of their own lives under such conditions? How do they assert the equal value and grievability of their lives?

AZ: You say: „The opposite of precarity is not security" (and in the light of Paris killings *this* in itself is too important), „but rather the struggle for an egalitarian *social and political order* in which a livable interdependency becomes possible" (Butler 2015: 69). What is that order? Does it have an already existing name, or do we yet have to invent it? This seems very important today, when we witness an almost global mistrust towards what is being called (liberal) democracy, in our part of the world instituted after the fall of real-socialism, but also with the return of various Marxist visions of that order.

JB: Maybe there is no name for that order, but we can use this thought, this aspiration, this demand, to evaluate the kinds of orders that are presented to us. I think there are many reasons to go back to Marx to think about structural inequality. His early reflections on „life" are also worth reconsidering. And I do not think we can simply dispense with all forms of liberal democracy or from its inheritance. These are the resources with which we struggle, so the question is, what can and ought to be reanimated from these histories?

AZ: Revolutions, or some in size smaller, yet revolutionary gatherings at the squares, in the streets, in other public spaces, are not only important because they may be conducive to a different kind of political and social order. The presence of the gathered bodies undoes or at least unsettles the division between public/private. As you said, „revolution sometimes happens because *everyone refuses to go home*" (Butler 2015: 98).

JB: One aspect of the general strike is to stop businesses, to stop the rhythms of the day, the ritualistic ways of leaving the home, going to work, and returning to home. Once a condition becomes radically unacceptable, one refuses to go to work, but one also refuses to go home. One is, as it were, jettisoned into a public sphere, whether it is the square or the internet or

some other interstitial space. It is a way that bodies assembled say „no" but also exercise, and demonstrate, their tenacity and demand.

I do think that leaving the house or the shelter for the street is a way of refusing to let political discontent remain private. The street, however, can no longer adequately represent the public sphere, and the internet crosses the distinction between private and public in some new ways. One can be inside and in the world at the same time, and have a political presence that is alternately or simultaneously embodied and virtual. The republican imaginary that models the private/public distinction on the difference between household and public square does still sometimes hold when people leave their homes and populate the street, but none of that „works" without the media relay, the media as the condition of possibility of gathering. And the media is in some way neither public nor private, though it articulates that distinction anew all the time.

AZ: Freedom to move, but also to have infrastructure for this movement and to not be detained or otherwise prevented from moving, is a precondition for freedom of assembly. This freedom is in its own right a precondition of politics?

JB: I think this is a freedom that pre-exists the very idea of „rights". If we have a right to assemble, it is because we have a presumed capacity to move and gather. The right presupposes a body unconstrained enough, enable enough, to move toward other bodies in places that are seen and heard. So there is an operative presumption about bodies, movements, and freedom that precedes the „right" to assemble. It is this corporeal presupposition of rights discourse that is often missed when rights are considered to be abstract and individual. Here, again, Marx continues to help us.

AZ: „It is not from pervasive love for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We live together because we have no choice" to live otherwise. What we *can choose* is to live together non-violently (Butler 2015: 191). I assume that your future work will revolve around the issues of non-violence, as a specific way of struggling against aggression. What motivates us to *preserve* the lives of the other? How do we work through dependency and aggression?

JB: Yes, this is a large question, one which I am thinking about very often right now. I accept the notion that social relations are not simply loving ones, that there is aggression within the social bond, and that every social relation contains within it the possibility of destructiveness. It is the late Freud who guides me here, but also Melanie Klein. At the same time, there are obligations to safeguard one another's lives even in the midst of very strong destructive

impulses. Especially in the Balkans or in other places where there has been horrific violence, it is not always easy to step away from violence when there is still shock, outrage, the memory of horror, and fear. In Palestine and Israel as well, the conflict is overwhelming, but so too is the obligation to live together, if not in the same place, then contiguously, and for there to be a commitment not only to give up modes of violence, both state and non-state violence, but to make that „sacrifice" into the condition of any possible future. Co-habitation is in this way an ethical demand to affirm the equal value of lives, the equal grievability of lives, and regardless of whether we love or hate, we are obligated to co-habit the earth together on terms of equality. This last comes from Hannah Arendt, her argument against Eichmann, an argument, we might say, that still functions as a norm and hope for this time.

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