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SOCIAL ONTOLOGY: BUTLER VIA ARENDT VIA LOIDOLT

ABSTRACT
This short contribution is written on the occasion of the book discussion of Sophie Loidolt's *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (2018) at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. It presents an attempt to read the two key notions Loidolt elaborates in her book – spaces of meaning and spaces of the public and private – from a critical perspective offered by Judith Butler's taking up of Arendt's work. Offering Butler's conception of social ontology through several major points of contestation with Arendt, I argue against an all too simple reduction of her understanding of the political and normativity to poststructuralist ones.

KEYWORDS
Judith Butler, social ontology, spaces of meaning, private, public

Judith Butler's engagement with Hannah Arendt's thought is vast. Butler's recent work is almost incomprehensible if one were to neglect Arendt's long-lasting influence. Of course, Butler is not a usual Arendtian scholar and has many open disputes with her, most certainly with the strict division between the public and the private. However, some critical points – *that plurality is at the heart of the political; that plurality is not something that simply is, but essentially something we take up and do; that it actualizes in a space of appearance which is never politically neutral; that agency is performative and not in need of a sovereign subject; that Arendtian 'acting in concert' goes together well with Levinasian 'justice for the other'* – prove to be the touchstones of Butler's newer inquiry.

The italicized points have been excerpted from Sophie Loidolt's "Introduction" to her 2018 book *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity*. These work as central tenets in Loidolt's own phenomenological elaboration of Arendt's work. One might thus hastily draw a conclusion that Loidolt shares many similar concerns with Butler, if within different methodological frameworks. But, such an inference proves to be wrong. Butler's name appears in the "Introduction", but in a paragraph which acknowledges three different 'continental' approaches to 'the political', where "Arendt now – unfortunately – plays only a marginal role" (Loidolt 2018: 9). More specifically, Butler is categorized under the second rubric of "Foucauldian and Althusserlian theories of 'subjectivation'... that refer to 'the political' within their respective conceptions of a subversive repetition of subjectifying

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orders" (ibid). Throughout the book there are some scattered references to Butler's texts, even if they refer precisely to those works where Arendt seems to be one of Butler's most appreciated interlocutors. And yet, those references do not alter the first description of Butler's work provided in the "Introduction" – which, although not entirely incorrect, is decidedly insufficient to describe Butler's engagement with Arendt. True, one might contend that being a Foucauldian prevents Butler to become a full Arendtian which, nonetheless, says little of the way she incorporated Arendt's thought into her understanding of plurality, performativity, agency – notions conspicuously missing in Foucault.

It is a fact that Loidolt did not write a book on Arendt and Butler or, for that matter, about various ways to exploit Arendt's ideas. She is explicit that *Phenomenology of Plurality* is supposed to fill in the gap in the phenomenological readings of Arendt, and to even persuade phenomenologists that reading Arendt may benefit them. Since Butler is by no means famed for her involvement with phenomenology, she may be scantily referenced or categorized at the beginning as belonging to a strand of thought not typically of interest to phenomenologists, and in effect, be done away with. Although such methodological enclosures are unfortunately extraordinarily common, I argue that they contravene to the true Arendtian way of writing, which strongly resisted disciplinary and methodological closures. What is more, with clear-cut approaches we sometimes tend to lose important linkages that might not fit into our neat methodological distinctions. They nevertheless appear – and they may prove important, or at least interesting to elaborate. One such, I want to claim, would have come to the fore if Butler's engagement with Arendt, through her own elaboration of social ontology, was given more space.

Sophie Loidolt begins her book with a set of questions the answers to which would help us recognize the fundamentality of the political perspective for social ontology. The questions are:

> What does it mean to be a person and a self together with others? How do self-expression and plural expression correlate? What roles do appearance and visibility (in public or in private) play alongside linguistic and narrative elements for being a self, for acting together, and for constituting a group? Why do I need others for my actions to be meaningful? What kind of we-formations do the activities of speaking, acting and judging yield? What kind of sharing comes to pass in the sharing of a common world and space of appearance? (ibid: 3)

From *Precarious Life* onwards, Butler explicitly invokes *social* ontology, one which assumes that an individual (self) is always together with others. She rejects discrete ontology of the person in favour of the notion of interdependency (Butler 2009: 19). This has effects on how the notions of agency and responsibility have been developed ("Untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted in language, how what it creates is also what it derives from elsewhere... agency begins where sovereignty wanes" [Butler 1997: 15–16]; "Indeed, it may

be that plurality disrupts sovereignty" [Butler 2012: 174]); how a 'we' is formed (Butler 2007); how my own actions gain meaning only within a certain 'we', when I am exercising a plural and performative right to appear (Butler 2015), within a space which reproduces and sustains norms of visibility, norms that allocate the right to appear differentially. However, a 'we' shares a common world – a strong Arendtian point – and we are all "the unchosen, but we are nevertheless unchosen together" (Butler 2012: 25), which is what produces a radical potential for new modes of politics and an alternative social ontology Butler strives for (ibid: 174). In that sense, we can say that a very similar set of questions which mobilizes Loidolt's inquiry also animates much of Butler's investigation into how the political frames social ontology.

Disentangling Butler's notion of the political from the subversive repetition of subjectifying orders might bring her concept of social ontology to the fore. This concept, I believe, would have been of use to Loidolt in her own endeavours to explicate the quandaries of the political both in Arendt herself, and in the larger framework of political intersubjectivity. To demonstrate that, in what follows I will focus on Loidolt's explication of the notion of space of meaning, and the fact that we are conditioned as beings who have the capacity to act (and act in concert, that is politically) within spaces of appearance. I will offer possible ways of reading Loidolt's Arendt and Butler together, showing that some fruitful philosophical frames may arise from such an intersection.

When defining human condition in Arendt, Loidolt differentiates between basic quasi-transcendental conditions; the self-made conditions, i.e. the ways we act upon the world; and conditionality itself, the fact that however inventive our actions were, there is no way to abolish our being conditioned as such (Loidolt 2018: 120–122). The human is "on the one hand, a creature dependent on pre-givenness (*Vorgegbenheit*) and, on the other hand, a creature that actively shapes its surrounding and thereby produces its own conditions" (ibid: 122). The first, quasi-transcendental dimension of conditionality – which includes natality, mortality, life, worldliness and plurality – is what structures our appearance as men (as Arendt would have it), or humans (as Butler would insist). Importantly, this is not an absolute structure, but a historically enacted one, enacted with each new life. The fact that we are born into the world, that our existence is finite and exposed to injurability, that we are living as bodies who are inescapably together with other equally born and mortal beings, is what Butler attempts to grasp with precariousness, the notion borrowed from Levinas. Although precariousness is often understood as a primarily ethical concept, I argue that in Butler it has a vital ontological function – "lives are by definition precarious" (Butler 2009: 13, 25). Precariousness is, however, also always social, which impacts greatly on how we appear or fail to appear, and act, and act in concert:

> the social conditions of my existence are never fully willed by me, and there is no agency apart from such conditions and their unwilled effects. Necessary and interdependent relations to those I never chose, and even to those I never knew, form the condition of whatever agency might be mine. (ibid: 171)

In Butler, the space of appearance and any agency which may be produced within such a space, is decisively *social*.[1] It is for that reason that I want to relate her concept of norms and the concept of spaces of meaning, elaborated in Loidolt in great detail. Norms play a key role in Butler's entire work (at first used in relation to gender, later, more broadly, in relation to the human) and are, upon a whole, what makes Butler a Foucauldian. The fact that Loidolt mentions that 'spaces of meaning' can in general be connected to Foucault's concept of *dispositif* (Loidolt 2018: 130) in a way also supports this otherwise unlikely link. My intention, however, is to go further and show that it is from Arendt's thought that a complex relationship between norms and appearance needs to be drawn, a relationship central for Butler's conception of social ontology.

Space of meaning is what makes someone appear as meaningful, that is, intelligible and legible. Loidolt explains it as emerging from conditions, conditioned activity, and experience with this activity (ibid: 126). There is no 'outside' of such spaces, they are basic forms of how lived space and time can be structured. Spaces of meaning are fundamental, but not foundationalist; they are constitutive of who we are and how we encounter and orient ourselves in the world. Crucially, a space of meaning is not a psychological disposition, but an ontological state of being-in-the-world, something which conditions both our behaviours and psychological dispositions. Intersubjectivity – because we are never alone in-the-world – plays a key role in actualizing, maintaining but also altering spaces of meaning. Spaces of meaning *are actualized as lived*: they gain their meaningfulness from the processual nature of living activities, and from experiencing both their liveliness and their repetition which produces them as recognizable and appreciated, as activities. Spaces of meaning *are maintained as shared*: they gain their meaningfulness because they only take place in the context of plurality, and as such produce a reality that is, of necessity, a common one. From the very fact that they are lived and shared, they belong to an intricate entanglement of layers of relations which is always in the process of both sedimenting and opening towards something new.

This description of spaces of meaning can be applied to norms as Butler defines them. While it is true that in Butler's analysis norms do not have a neutral connotation (in *Gender Trouble*, they generally appear as constraints, as rigid, regulatory), it would be misleading to assume that Butler advocates for a world *without norms*. Norms are constitutive as they are the spaces of meaning. But there is something wrong with the norms as they are now – something is meaningless with the spaces of meaning – if the structure or reality

1 It is a notorious claim that Arendt was somewhat elusive with the terms she used, but that applies to Butler as well. The social in Butler is a strange mixture of the political, the public and the cultural (used mostly during the first phase of her work and almost disappearing in the second), but it also differs, in large strokes, from 'the social' in Arendt (Pitkin 1995). For the sake of brevity, let us contend that the social here implies an impure, historic trace of the intersubjective world which comes to frame our own activities and experiences of those activities. The social is a result of plurality which conditions any of those activities and the ways we experience them.

conditions some of us to be, act and experience ourselves as less real or unreal. That which is wrong or meaningless is a *social* dimension (arising from activity and experiences of that activity). Otherwise, how could we explain that something which is *constitutive for (all of) us as humans* makes possible that *some* humans are left out of the space which allocates humanity – meaningfulness that is lived and shared? How is it possible that some of us live as illegible and unintelligible?

> [T]he 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, *socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility*. Inasmuch as 'identity' is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the *cultural* emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the *gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined*. (Butler 1999: 23, italics mine)

Thus, the norms are socially established and maintained, they have their cultural elaboration and affirmation, and they are performed by us – they emerge from our conditioned activities and our experiences of those activities. Heuristically, norms could be cleansed from the social (or the cultural), but it remains unclear what would be the meaning of a man, a person, a coherent and continuous entity, a human, in a space of meaning where meaning has not been produced through conditioned activity and experience. For Butler there is no prior ontological level which would be superseded or supplanted by a social or a political one.

In that sense, we may, as Loidolt does in her interpretation of Arendt, differentiate between the *constitutive* dimension of spaces of meaning and an *established* dimension of the intentionally produced spaces of private and public. At the level of analysis, we may agree that spaces of meaning – or norms which define us and define for us what is understandable, viable, and livable – precede the establishment of the spaces where these norms operate. Now, if we were to follow the consequences of Butler's argument against Arendt, it is only at the analytical level that we could maintain this division: to have an ontological status, to appear as ontologically viable being, is precluded for beings who somehow do not conform to norms – who seem to be outside of the space of meaning, although, supposedly, there is no outside to it.

I argue that it is the body that makes all the difference here. Indeed, the body in Arendt is emphatically different from that of an abstract, bodiless transcendental subject. Her 'man' is embodied, but the contingencies that make up the facts of 'his' concrete existence are simply integrated into a structure of quasi-transcendental conditions (a man is bodily, but all else – his gender, skin-colour, the milieu he is born into, etc. – is simply part of 'the' body) (Loidolt 2018: 121; Zerilli 1995: 173–175). Careful not to repeat the vocational difficulty of those trained in philosophy (Arendt being one), Butler never forgets "that 'the' body comes in genders" (Butler 1993: viii) (and, we may reiterate, that also [human] coherence and continuity comes in genders).

On an abstract plane of analysis, a gendered body is 'the body' with a gender, a contingent trait which might have been different (male *or* female *or* something in-between). However, within the spaces of meaning, produced by conditioned activities and by the experiences of these activities, this trait becomes meaningful in a certain way, as lived and shared, as activated and experienced (repetitively, Butler would of course add). The body is something that makes us worldly, living and mortal, but also crucially open to sight (exposed, displayed, impossible to fully hide – thus visible), it makes us 'social'. For Butler, visibility is what of necessity already enters into the definition of precariousness of life, and is not ontologically posterior to it. Therefore, an ontology which has an embodied human at its core is, according to Butler, always a social ontology, because "the body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is mine and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life" (Butler 2004: 26). That we come as bodies is what enables plurality; that we come as born and mortal, living and vulnerable is what conditions our appearance; that we come in bodies that convey some meaning (gender, skin-colour) is what makes us intelligible in some way. Visibility is part of intelligibility, not something separate from it. We *do not appear* if we are *not visible*, if we do not count as having an intelligible reality.

The public dimension of the body is therefore a crucial point for Butler, something which precludes the differentiation between the *constitutive* dimension of spaces of meaning and an *established* dimension of the intentionally produced spaces of private and public. The body is emergent in the world, it appears when the man/human appears, and its appearance is invested with meanings that mean something only through the body. Therefore, to retain a private/public divide as intentionally erected and fixed is for Butler to retain conditions of appearance that actualize unequally, that justify abject invisibility of some bodies which as bodies participate in the spaces of meaning, but are socially precluded from appearing or produced as non-appearing. To retain a private/public divide is to claim that in an ontological sense there is plurality (because there are bodi*es*), but that in the political sense plurality becomes enacted in a restricted and bodiless ways. This would in effect contradict the basic condition of plurality.

This is then the core of the major dispute between Butler and Arendt. There is no storage room where we could consign the bodies when we step out in the visible spaces of appearance to do politics. If there is, however, such a storage, then it is erected and maintained as a storage for some bodies which are socially allowed to appear as bodiless, as only acting and speaking subjects – where plurality enacts itself as a proliferation of the first-person perspectives. Without bodies, or more to the point, with a depository where we leave them for a spell while we (*some* of us) act and speak, no plurality, as a condition of appearance, can be actualized *as* plurality. What does become actualized is a social (or cultural) inscription in the norm that interferes with, or even defies the conditions of appearance.

In conclusion, let us recall one of the many places where Arendt explicates her understanding of the private and the public:

> [T]he political realm... is public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is. To assert one's own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others. To the Greeks this was the one great privilege attached to public life and lacking in the privacy of the household, where one is neither seen nor heard by others. (The family, wife and children, and slaves and servants, were *of course* not recognized as fully human.) In private life one is hidden and can neither appear nor shine. (Arendt 2005: 14, italics mine)[2]

We may say that this quote is just a sign of admiration for the Greeks who, despite their lack of respect for all the bodies that populated what used to be the polis, did have 'the political' Arendt laments has been lost for us forever. We may also try to somehow save Arendt from this divide by saying that its time has happily gone, and we are now wiser and can do politics so that all of us flourish bodiless in one sphere, and are protected as bodily in the other. Whichever strategy we choose, the problem remains with an "of course". In the quoted passage, but also in Arendt's exposition of the political, it serves as a double confirmation of the intentionality and fixedness of the boundaries between public and private, which are for her important precisely as existing, and as existing as sharp and unbreakable. Some spaces are spaces of appearance, where everybody can appear – on the condition that everybody is recognized as fully human. The fully human can show – be visible and audible, seen and heard – because there are spaces which attest to the full humanity. However, this gloomy "of course" is part of the *social* ontology which admits that some will be constituted as meaningless or as those who are unable to convey meaning, to take part in the spaces of meaning (although there is no outside to them) – who will have to remain hidden as humans. This is also why, according to Butler, in the extant social ontology 'the human' operates as a differential norm: "a value and morphology that may be allocated and retracted, aggrandized, personified, degraded and disavowed, elevated and affirmed" (Butler 2009: 76).

Butler urges us to think differently, to strive for an alternative social ontology – one which would diverge from what precludes conditions of appearance to be actualized as equally lived and shared. I argue that her understanding of social ontology owes a great deal to Arendt's notion of plurality (what is constitutive for humans as embodied and appearing), but it also departs significantly from it precisely due to the established nature of a divide that seem to enable some to be political (that is, effectively bodiless) and consign others to

2 I have decided to put a stress only on this apsect of the private. Loidolt conscientiously differentiates between various ways Arendt seems to have used the term which, as Loidolt pertinently shows, refers to many things at the same time (the darkness of *physis*, bodily functions, drudgery, love, something which is privative, but also intimate, or protected, or shut down in its invisibility) (Loidolt 2018: 135–138).

the sphere where bodies reign, albeit non-politically. This constitutive tension remains one of the cornerstones of Butler's political philosophy, and her later work gives us reasons to believe that the tension derives from Butler's long-standing engagement with Arendt. In that sense, we might say that Butler invites an insurrection at the level of ontology (Butler 2004: 33) as part of striving for a political space of plurality which would cease to be divided along the lines of shining and remaining in the dark forever.

Sophie Loidolt's scrutinous application of phenomenological framework to Hannah Arendt's texts helps us understand not only Arendt's take on the political, but also why that take remains so important and simultaneously so frustrating for Judith Butler. In that sense, Loidolt's elaboration of phenomenology of plurality reads as a fine guide into a thought which has no phenomenological aspirations of its own, but it still is deeply implicated with Arendt's thought. The reverse may equally be true, that Loidolt would have profited from more thorough engagement with Butler's thought, even if this thought refuses to settle itself in strict boundaries, phenomenological or otherwise.

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Socijalna ontologija: Batler preko Arent preko Lojdolt

Apstrakt

Ovaj kratak doprinos napisan je povodom diskusije o knjizi *Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* Sofi Lojdolt na Institutu za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju. On predstavlja pokušaj čitanja dva ključna pojma koja Lojdolt izlaže u svojoj knjizi – prostori značenja i prostori javnog i privatnog – iz kritičke perspektive koju Džudit Batler nudi baveći se radom Arentove. Razmatrajući koncepciju socijalne ontologije Batler kroz nekoliko značajnih tačaka njene rasprave sa Arent zalagaću se protiv olake redukcije njenih shvatanja političkog i normativnog na poststrukturalistička shvatanja.

Ključne reči: Džudit Batler, socijalna ontologija, prostori značenja, prvatno, javno