

## Who's Afraid of Judith Butler?: The Moral Crusade against Human Rights in Brazil\*

“Leave our children in peace!” a woman cried out during Judith Butler’s lecture at the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP). Butler was presenting the Brazilian edition of her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012; Brazilian edition 2017); she had just said that her lecture, which protestors were attempting shut down, wasn’t about gender after all. The next day, demonstrators in front of the SESC-Pompeia cultural center – where Butler was participating in an event called *The Ends of Democracy* – burned an effigy of a witch with Butler’s face. A few days later, in São Paulo’s Congonhas airport, a group chased after Butler, shouting “Pedophile!” This event horrified and perplexed academics and human rights supporters in Brazil and throughout the world. What is going on in our country if we have reached the point where groups organize protests and sign petitions against Judith Butler’s mere presence?

What evil do these conservative groups project onto one of the greatest intellectuals of our time? Judging from the events we described above, and from posters, videos, and posts on social media, groups like Right [-Wing] São Paulo and the Free Brazil Movement (MBL) regard Butler as the personification of what they call “gender ideology.” Butler’s lectures in São Paulo focused on questions of democracy, but the protests against her were based on her theories about gender and sexuality.

In response to the impact and violence of these protests, we organized the event “Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler? Moral Crusades Against Human Rights in Brazil” (UNIFESP, December 8th, 2017) Our objective was to reflect on the attacks against intellectuals, educators, and artists that have marked last years. This is how we composed the base for our Debate Section in *cadernos pagu*: with texts that articulate multiple reflections in

---

\* Reviewed by Fernando de Figueiredo Balieiro.

response to the questions raised by the persecution and hate that we have seen materialize in a sort of contemporary witch-hunt.

In the midst of Brazil's current political reality – which, since 2014, has been marked by the criminalization of politics, the impeachment of the first female president in the country's history, and by economic crises and rising unemployment – a climate of collective frustration with politicians and with the government has taken root, paving the way for a hegemonic anti-political rhetoric. Certain groups have organized against the recent modification of gender hierarchies and greater visibility and recognition of sexual diversity. Thus, it was not merely by chance that Butler's lectures on themes of democracy were eclipsed by moral entrepreneurs who persecuted her as the incarnation of the specter they aim to combat.

In present-day Brazil, democracy is threatened by the power of an interpretation of reality that operates by creating enemies. The politicization of disputes disseminates authoritarianism constantly, reiterating a distance between “us” and “the Others,” as we can see below in Ingrid Cyfer's article (2018). As Berenice Bento (2018) argues, for example, this construction of total alterities produces limits on the State's recognition of trans\* people and its historical policies of living or let die. This, in turn, amplifies hate discourses opening space for the ascension of a new populism, which Raphael Neves (2018) analyzes here.

A prevailing moral grammar has brought secular interest groups like the Free Brazil Movement (MBL) and Schools Without [Political] Parties together with religious groups (be they Catholic, evangelical, neo-Pentecostal, or otherwise). These alliances reinforce the tendency of attributing concrete social problems to imaginary enemies, whether communists, gay people, feminists, or trans\* people. This type of political practice is founded in a worldview divided between those who represent “Good” and others who represent “Evil.” From politics to morals, interest groups demonize the human rights claims made by women,

homosexuals, trans\* people, *travestis*<sup>1</sup>, and intersex people, among others, concatenating them into a singular ghost that they denominate “gender ideology.”

In his text below, Richard Miskolci (2018) describes how the actions of these groups have come to articulate a kind of entrepreneurship that has taken the shape of a moral crusade against sexual and reproductive rights and all those who support them. The history of this phenomenon is reconstituted here by Sônia Corrêa (2018). As such, this Debate Section brings together elements that allow us to identify and analyze the political and social forces that take aim against any scientific and artistic production that dares to present anything deemed obscene by authoritarian movements. In other words, anything that (in the vision of these authoritarian movements) ought to remain “offstage,” such as demands for juridical equality, everyday security, and recognition. Thus, these movements seek to impede advances that guarantee equality to groups that have historically been relegated to subaltern social positions, kept in a limbo of citizenship as though they were not worthy of the right to their own lives, or of making decisions regarding their own bodies.

When political groups seek to restrict human rights, it comes as no shock to see them make use of sophisticated tactics. These tactics demand analytical astuteness to be identified, and even more to be contained. Fernando de Figueiredo Balieiro (2018) shows how conservative interest groups created a strategy through which they present their actions against homosexuals as a supposed defense of “children under threat,” as in the aforementioned shouts during Butler’s lecture. But this context also generates forms of resistance, such as those explored by Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira (2018) in his examination of the experiences of people who follow African diasporic religions, on the one hand,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Travesti” is a form of self-designation. According to Larissa Pelúcio, *Abjeção e desejo: uma etnografia travesti sobre o modelo de prevenção de aids* (São Paulo: Anablume, 2009), in Brazil, *travestis* are people who seek to construct their bodies through materials and symbols understood as social markers of femininity.

and members of inclusive churches, on the other. These experiences mediate languages, concepts, and forms of action.

This Debate Section aims to answer the question “Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?” by identifying interest groups that articulate campaigns against sexual and reproductive rights, and against subjects who resist such campaigns. Although these texts take the attacks on Butler as an entry point, the Discussion Section is not a dossier on her work. First and foremost, it is an examination of human rights, debates of which have taken on a central role in Brazilian politics and that will influence the campaigns for 2018’s presidential elections and our society in coming years.

Richard Miskolci\*

Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira\*\*

## References

- BALIEIRO, Fernando de Figueiredo. “Não se meta com meus filhos”: a construção do pânico moral da criança sob ameaça. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018.
- BENTO, Berenice. Necrobiopoder: Quem pode habitar o Estado-nação?. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018.
- BUTLER, Judith. *Caminhos divergentes: judaicidade e crítica do sionismo*. São Paulo, Boitempo, 2017. Tradução: Rogério Bettoni.
- CORRÊA, Sônia. A “política do gênero”: um comentário genealógico. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018.

---

\* Associate Professor of Sociology – UFSCar, São Carlos, SP, Brazil, Researcher of the CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Associate Investigator of Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero Pagu-UNICAMP. richard.miskolci@unifesp.br

\*\* Associate Professor of Anthropology (UNIFESP), São Paulo, SP, Brazil. pedropaulopereira@gmail.com

- CYFER, Ingrid. A bruxa está solta: os protestos contra a visita de Judith Butler ao Brasil à luz de sua reflexão sobre ética, política e vulnerabilidade. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018
- MISKOLCI, Richard. Exorcizando um fantasma: os interesses por trás do combate à “ideologia de gênero”. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018
- NEVES, Raphael “Joga pedra na Judith”: discursos de ódio e populismo. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018
- PEREIRA, Pedro Paulo Gomes. Judith Butler e a pomba-gira. *cadernos pagu* (53), Campinas, SP, Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu/Unicamp, 2018.