

The witch is loose: Protests against Judith Butler's Visit to Brazil in Light of Her Reflections on Ethics, Politics and Vulnerability *

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the protests against Judith Butler's visit to Brazil in 2017 in the light of her own reflection on hatred, fear, violence, recognition and freedom, with special attention to her work published since the 2000s. My hypothesis is that, in her recent work on ethics, Butler's intertwining of recognition and political agency contributes to explore the relationship between the refusal of difference in the Brazilian public sphere and the invisibility of the political vulnerability of groups and individuals portrayed as public threats.

Keywords: Judith Butler, Recognition, Violence, Ethics, Vulnerability.

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In November 2017, Judith Butler's visit to Brazil was captured by the polarizing climate of the Brazilian public debate. Even before her arrival, social networks were raging with hate messages against the philosopher, who would be invading our territory to pervert helpless minds and hearts. Butler was described as a terrifying threat, endowed with a destructive superhuman force. In fact, the protests against Butler were not a revolt against a person but were rather cries against the diabolical power of a woman. So the scene of a doll burning to the shouts of "Burn the witch!" should not have surprised us so much. Nor was it any wonder that nationalist slogans such as "Man is man, woman is woman, and here in Brazil you can't do what you want!" and "You are not accepted in your country, and do you want to be accepted in Brazil? Butler out!" were added to these cries.

One of her statements about these attacks was: "(...) the stance of hatred and censure is based on fear, fear of change, fear of letting others live in a different way from yours" (Rodrigues, 2017). In this essay, I take this comment as a starting point to reflect on the protests against Butler's visit to Brazil in the light of her thinking on ethics, politics and vulnerability.

The relationship between fear, hate, and violence has been profoundly explored by Butler in her work, especially in *The Psychic Life of Power* and in her books on ethics, politics and vulnerability, including *Precarious Life* (2004), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Giving an account of oneself* (2005), *Frames of War* (2009), *Parting Ways: jewishness and the critique of Zionism* (2012), and *Notes Toward a Theory of Assembly* (2015). In her more recent works, the relation between fear, violence, recognition and politics, which has always been present in her thought, has gained more centrality. The reason for this has already been pointed out by the author herself: the post-September 11 atmosphere and the consequent growth of xenophobic, homophobic, sexist, racist, nationalist and militaristic discourses as a reaction to the perception and exposure of the vulnerability of those believed to be invulnerable in their territory (Butler, 2006:XI).

A first and more accessible approach to her complex thinking on ethics and violence since that time can be made through her comments on a homophobia case. In a 2006 interview¹, Butler tells the story of a boy who lived all his life in Maine. As a child, it was noted that he walked in a feminine way, and in adolescence this way of walking became even more pronounced. The boy then became the target of harassment and homophobic insults to the extent that some of the town's boys gathered in a group, beat the boy up and threw him over a bridge and they killed him.

In such a case, Butler says, what we need to ask is:

why would someone be killed for the way they walk? Why would this walk be so upsetting to those other boys, that they would feel that they must stop that walk no matter what, they must eradicate the possibility of that person ever walking again?

For her, in cases like these, what we are dealing with is an “extremely deep panic or fear, an anxiety that pertains to gender norms”.

The questions that Butler raises from the murder of the Maine boy already suggest that her approach to this type of violence will not be so much about demonization as about the pathologization of individuals or groups, whether they are victims or aggressors. Butler, in fact, refuses to turn any of them into an external enemy, into an abject subject against whom we can comfortably define ourselves. Instead, she promises to shed light on the silencing and violence inscribed in this comfort, which can seduce both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups.

In the search for an alternative way to interpret violence, Butler finds in Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas important

¹ The interview was given to the French documentary *Philosophe en Tout Genre* (Judith Butler..., 2006).

sources of inspiration that allow her to articulate this problem not as the brute force of exceptionally perverse minds but rather as the expression of the refusal of what is unknown in the other, and also, or perhaps above all, of the refusal of what is unknown in ourselves. Her ethics of nonviolence is thus clearly an ethics that emerges from the ethical failure of our “attempt to achieve our social identity” (Butler, 2015:60). It is an ethics based on our opacity, the impossibility of knowing and fully grasping both the other and ourselves.

However, Butler acknowledges that this opacity can be daunting. She believes the attempt to master the fear of the unknown tends to arouse a feeling of anxiety in the face of the difference that fixes the other as a threat even before he or she has done us any harm. This fear, the result of the simple and inevitable presence of otherness, is, for Butler, the main trigger of violence like that suffered by the boy from Maine but also of violence that appears as an attempt to censor and control what can and what cannot be said, or even who can and who cannot say, and the protests against Butler in Brazil are examples of such attempts.

In short: the attempt to reject the unknown could not be ethical for Butler, because the sense of ethics she seeks

(...) would be spawned by a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself. When we claim to know and to present ourselves, we will fail some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are. We cannot reasonably expect anything different from others in return. To acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgment is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are constituted in partial opacity to themselves (Butler, 2005:42).

Butler's ethics of non-violence is intertwined with her conception of vulnerability, whose recognition defines the contours of the public sphere. This is precisely the opposite of what much theory and political philosophy traditionally supports since it generally identifies the public sphere as a space of autonomy and rationality rather than of vulnerability (Ferrarese, 2016:224). For Butler, however, it is only when the precariousness of human life, our embodied and existential frailty, becomes visible in the public sphere, that we are recognized as human lives.

In the work of Butler our humanity does not depend on any attestation of rationality, proof of specific abilities, or any kind of certificate of divine filiation. For Butler, what makes us human is precisely what makes us fragile and dependent on other humans. And this fragility is not something to be defeated, overcome, or even shyly withdrawn into the private sphere. Her approach to the problem of human vulnerability places it in politics, making it a central aspect of democratic life, since it is the prohibition of public mourning for certain lives that defines the frontiers of the public sphere, the latter understood as the dividing line that distinguishes the lives that count as human lives from the lives that do not.

It seems important to consider that the prohibition on certain forms of public grieving itself constitutes the public sphere on the basis of such a prohibition. The public will be created on the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized and diffused (Butler, 2006:37-38).

This dehumanization can take place in two apparently opposing ways: the invisibility or the excessive public exposure of the image of these people. The difference between these two situations is only apparent because in both cases what actually occurs is the concealment of human suffering that evokes empathy. As an example of dehumanization through the invisibility of the image, Butler cites the statistical records of civilian deaths in countries considered enemies at war. They are counted

as numbers, trivialized in the technical term “collateral damage”. As an example of dehumanization by overexposure of the image, she mentions the assassinations of Saddam Hussein and Osmar Bin Laden, who were portrayed as absolute evil, as universal aggressors (Butler, 2006:141).

If the process of dehumanization is thus understood, its inverse, the process of humanization, will correspond to the opposite, the expansion of the public sphere, by promoting the visibility of the vulnerability that humanizes everyone.

Butler mentions as an example of the latter process the empathy aroused by the spread of the suffering of Vietnamese children during the Vietnam War.

In her words:

In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual Field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that Field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic Field of representation itself. Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed somewhere else, beyond themselves to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show. It was from the apprehension of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizens came to develop an important and vital consensus against the war. But if we continue to discount the words that deliver that message to us, and if the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnameable and ungrievable, if they do not appear in their precariousness and their destruction, we will not be moved. We will not return to a sense of ethical outrage that is, distinctively, for an Other², in the name of an Other (Butler, 2006:150).

² Butler clarifies that she uses the notion of “‘other’ to denote the human other in its specificity except where, for technical reasons, the term needs to mean

Vulnerability is therefore not a mere fact but rather a moral and political claim. At the moment when it is recognized, it is reconstituted. It is not prior to recognition, and this is precisely why we must strive for its visibility in the public sphere. But this struggle, as the example of the Vietnamese children suggests, is not to bring out the heroic omnipotence of the excluded but rather the political visibility of their fragility. It is in this way that, in this case, the range of lives which are “recognizable” as human, as liveable lives, has been expanded. This expansion, however,

is not a matter of a simple entry of the excluded into a public sphere whose frontiers are pre-established, it is, on the contrary, a critical opening to the questions: what is real, which lives are real, how can reality be remade? (Butler, 2006:33).

In an even more recent consideration, Butler gives us yet another example of how “reality can be remade”, of how this public sphere can be expanded. In an article entitled “Bodies in Alliance and Politics of the Streets”³, Butler comments on the march against homophobia and transphobia that takes place every year in Ankara, Turkey.

She notes that on the streets of the capital of Turkey (as in most cities in the world), the mere public appearance of transgender people exposes them to physical aggression and the risk of being assassinated. However, by appearing in the public space that excludes them and exposes them to violence they are challenging and destabilizing the public sphere’s borders. The

something slightly different. In Levinas, for instance, ‘the Other’ not only refers to the human other but acts as a place holder for an infinite ethical relations. In the latter case, I’ve capitalized the term” (Butler, 2005:X).

³ The article “Bodies in Alliance and Politics of the Street” was initially presented in the context of a series of lectures she gave in 2011 at Bryn Mawr College. The article was then extended and published in *Notes Toward a Theory of Assembly* (2015).

pathologization of these people would be called into question through this subversive occupation, which challenges the heteronormative ontology, a challenge that emerges from the march itself, from the very presence and persistence of the excluded in the public space that excludes them. Likewise, in political manifestations that explicitly take on the form of public mourning, as in Syria, "(...) where crowds of mourners become targets of military destruction, we can see how the existing public space is seized by those who have no existing right to gather there (...)" (Butler, 2011:4).

As can be seen, Butler condenses the relation between action and conditions to act in the following paradox: "none of us acts without the conditions to act, even though sometimes we must act to install and preserve those very conditions" (Butler, 2015:16). She confronts this paradox with a formulation strongly inspired by Arendt, according to which

the bodies on the street redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy (...). In wresting that power, a new space is created, a new "in between" bodies, as it were, that lays claims to existing space through the action of a new alliance, and those bodies are seized and animated by those existing spaces in the very acts by which they reclaim and resignify their meanings (Butler, 2011:5).

We might say that forms of resistance like these require fearless agents. But fearlessness here has to be understood not as the quality of someone who succeeds in mastering anxiety in the face of the unknown but rather as the characteristic of the one who embraces it, of the one who is generous with him or herself and with the other, precisely because of the vulnerability they have in common. Thus, in this sense of fearlessness, fear acquires a somewhat counter-intuitive meaning. It is not the opposite of courage, but rather the opposite of the acceptance of the other and of our self-acceptance; in short, it is the opposite of the acceptance of our common notion of the precariousness of human life, a

notion that creates, according to Butler, “a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler, 2006:20).

Thus, whether or not we agree with how Butler philosophically bases her theses⁴, I believe that her current philosophical and political project, based on her ethics of non-violence, presents an inspiring agenda that provokes us with the questions we need to ask in the current political context of Brazil, and in much of the world, in order to persevere in building more democratic political communities.

One of the main contributions of her present project seems to be the rejection of two types of responses to the hatred of difference: one of them is resentment and revenge, which I have already pointed out. The other corresponds to full, absolute and substantive identification as a source of political and social solidarity.

Butler's thesis on this subject, which had already been developed in depth in *Gender Problems*, is also emphasized in her reflections on ethics and politics. Once again, we can use an example mentioned by Butler herself to clarify her argument. In an interview given in 2015 to the editor of the area of Critical Theory and Philosophy of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Butler was asked about her position on the *#Je Suis Charlie* campaign. In her response, she once again warned of the ethical risks implicit in the language of identification, risks related to the tendency to anchor social solidarity in a particularistic ethical perspective that would suggest something like “It could have been me, so I stand with him”. However, Butler says, we should simply say that what happened to Charlie is absolutely wrong, we should say that

⁴ The main hypothesis of my current research project (“Political Agency and Recognition after Judith Butler’s ‘Ethical Turn’: The End of ‘False Antitheses’ in Feminist Critical Theory?”) is that Butler’s post-structuralist philosophical resources do not appear to be enough to justify some of the universalist claims inscribed in her ethics of nonviolence.

we are against the assassination of any group of people (...) in order to generalize the claim (...) we need to say that all assassinations are wrong. (...) We appeal to general principles (...) [that should] include all kinds of groups. Is assassination a correct political response to the views we disagree with? No! (...) No one should be assassinated (Judith Butler, 2015).

This does not mean, however, that one cannot claim equality by highlighting the inequalities associated with differences. For example, in this same interview, when questioned about the *Black Lives Matter* movement, Butler states that she does not see a substantive identification claim there as in the case of *Je Suis Charlie*. In her interpretation, the *Black Lives Matter* does not contradict something like *All Lives Matter*, because in their criticisms of the dehumanization of the lives of black people “there is still [says Butler] an aspiration toward the universal” (Judith Butler, 2015).

I would like to conclude by drawing attention to what may have been Butler's most obvious and simple contribution to the public debate in Brazil: her simple presence and fulfillment of her agenda, despite the protests. Perhaps Brazil has really proved to be an unreceptive and dangerous place for the public appearance of a philosopher like Butler. But just because she spoke in public, because she demonstrated her ideas amidst the protests, Butler has contributed to destabilizing the borders of the Brazilian public sphere, perhaps similarly to the march of gays and transsexuals in Turkey or the demonstrations of public mourning in Syria. And this has taken place at a time when the public sphere in Brazil is under pressure to become more closed and excluding.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Butler has been a kind of liberating leader capable of guaranteeing the excluded a place in the sun in the Brazilian public sphere. After all, to give her this omnipotence would be just another way of making her something different from the human, replacing the witch by a fairy.

Therefore, I believe that it was precisely because she does not incarnate the heroine of good in a struggle against absolute evil that we can say that her presence here was fearless, in the specific sense that she gives to the term. Actually, it was by emphasizing that hatred comes from fear, by exposing the panic when faced with difference of those who have declared her the public enemy of children, the family, the church and society that Butler made politically visible the vulnerability of her declared enemies. She has thus been able to simultaneously criticize and humanize those who have dehumanized her and has managed to displace the terrible witchhunt she was victim of into the public sphere and the field of political dispute.

Her troubled passage through Brazil, therefore, could not have been more timely and inspiring. Timely because it took place on the eve of the year in which everything indicates that political disputes will explode into violence; and inspiring because it signals us to the possibility of engaging in pluralistic and democratic manifestations against hatred fuelled by the fear of difference, a hatred that, little by little, dehumanizes both those who attack us and we ourselves.

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