

Judith Butler

Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly

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How should we understand the role of the body in politics? This is the central theme of Judith Butler's *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, in which she argues, contra Arendt, that often the material and social conditions of political appearance are political topics in their own right: public space, the recognition of our rights to protest, both in law and socially, as well as social provisions (for example, sustenance, healthcare) are all either required for political participation, or, where they are unavailable, can be the subject of political protest. Butler argues cogently that our bodies always represent more than our specific demands when we gather to protest: all of the things that shore up the body, as well as group interaction, are prevalent at the time of political assembly, even where they are not an overt part of our deliberations or demands. Butler starts the book by situating her thinking in terms of democracy, precarity, and neoliberalism: there is, she suggests, something about the appearance of assemblies, particularly those that are aimed at protesting precarity, or unliveable conditions, that is compounded by neoliberal discourse, given that the latter at once asks people to be independent but simultaneously moves to eliminate the institutions and conditions that make self-responsibility possible. Butler understands precarity as "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (33). Throughout the course of the book, Butler argues that everyone is vulnerable due to being embodied and relationally supported, but that some people are particularly problematically exposed due to their networks of support being undermined.

In chapter 1 Butler is concerned with outlining the link between her work on gender performativity and her work on precarity. Butler's main emphasis is that (gender) norms constitute boundaries of appearance, with those who perform distinctly outside of the recognized norms more likely to experience abuse and/or exclusion. However, lack of recognition in the public sphere extends beyond minority genders to many populations experiencing precarity. Because of this, Butler argues, there is a problem with Arendt's assumption that the body and its supports constitute a pre-political ground for political action. Butler criticizes Arendt's view that true agency and freedom are found only where our base needs are already met, which means any political movement aimed at fighting for survival must be understood as reactive. Nevertheless, Butler argues that Arendt does provide important insights into the notion of public and political appearance, as well as the ways in which a lack of recognition or citizenship leaves people without access to rights. How we

appear to others is therefore the base upon which Butler's move from gender performativity to this wider question of public assembly rests, because the ways in which we appear publicly are not similarly distributed in terms of social norms, values, and law: a French woman choosing to wear the veil has no right to public appearance in her country, just as an undocumented worker in the US has no right to protest.

In chapter 2 Butler argues that alliances across identity are necessary, not only because, as outlined in chapter 1, conditions of precarity stretch across different social groups, but also because our political and social groups, as well as our rights, are emergent and relationally produced structures and reactions to present conditions: identity does not precede our relationships with others. When we do ally and come together as an assembly—to demonstrate—Butler reminds us that the conditions of that assembly are bodies and the street: those bodies represent all of the relational supports (which include the other people required to form a critical mass) that make that public appearance a *de facto* assembly: these bodies therefore "speak" as bodies that are in need of support. Butler makes a link here to what she sees as a positive in Arendt's political theory, namely the necessity for subjects to appear to one another in the political domain. However, according to Butler, Arendt's political theory presupposes the existence of a private domain that supports this public appearance, even as it disvalues the private by ignoring it. Furthermore, this raises a question about how we characterize those who are not recognized, or not accorded equal recognition, in the political sphere. If we accept that these subjects cannot be political actors, by tacitly accepting that the established spaces of political appearance are the rightful place of political action, we leave those on the outside, it seems, as doubly dismissible. However, Butler argues, when excluded groups appear on the street they are creating plural political action: they create their own mode of appearance, showing that they were never nonpolitical subjects, even where they have been excluded from the established political realm.

The third chapter takes these themes further to discuss our ethical obligations to one another, particularly to those at a distance. Butler starts with the observation that, in the media age, we are called upon to respond affectively and ethically to those who are not in proximity with us and who do not form part of our "established communities." Butler then employs Levinas and Arendt in turn to discuss this in more depth, with particular reference to Palestine and Israel. In the work of Levinas, Butler highlights but pushes back against the notion of the other as more important than us: it is not that the other has primacy, but rather that we need to understand that the other, even the remote other, is intertwined with us: "the life of the other, the life that is not our own, is also our life" (108). Understanding a distant other's life as part of our own, Butler suggests, can help us to overcome the dichotomy between a communitarian stance that ethical obligations pertain only to those closest to us (dismissed as exclusionary) and a Kantian/humanist stance that we have obligations to all humans, as an abstract concept (not culturally sensitive). In the work of Arendt, similarly, it is the thrownness of being in the world, and the unchosen character of this that necessitates ethics: since we are unable to reconcile human difference, we must find ways of living with it, and we are all bound by this fact; no group has any prior claim to superiority. Butler concludes by circling back to precarity: "My point is not to rehabilitate humanism but, rather, to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity. No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life" (119). Interdependency, Butler reminds us, is inevitable but not always positive; thus there will always be a necessity for us to find ethical forms of cohabitation.

Chapter 4 is titled "Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitional Politics" and is a deeper look into how bodies can be understood as modes of resistance. When we understand the body as a situated body that depends on its relationships for survival, all bodies come to be viewed as vulnerable. Vulnerability is experienced differentially, however, and this raises questions about how that inequality is parsed and responded to. What we don't want, Butler argues, is to view more vulnerable or precarious bodies as essentially vulnerable—to do so risks the rise of paternalism (or colonialism) that purports to protect, rather than enfranchisement and freedom. Butler thinks there is an important political impetus to saying the body is vulnerable that avoids showing the body as ontologically one thing or another; rather, "the body exists then in an ecstatic relation to the supporting conditions it has or must demand, but this means the body never exists in an ontological mode that is distinct from its historical situation" (148). Thus when people demand relief from precarity, from living in particularly vulnerable conditions, they are making a political claim, not about what the body is, but what the body needs or should have in a specific context. When people protest, they resist particular forms of association or social structuring that undermine their ability to flourish, but this ability is not something that remains stable over time—it is always historically contingent. Butler is clear that she in no way endorses all mass assemblies as democratic: "they are neither intrinsically good or intrinsically bad; they assume differing values depending on what they are assembled for, and how that assembly works" (124). Specifically, Butler attests that those assemblies that aim at reconfiguring or protesting against existing conditions that are unequal or unliveable can be counted as examples of democracy.

The next chapter is concerned with theorizing how we should understand claims to popular sovereignty, to being "we, the people," in relation to state legitimacy. Butler is clear that a "we" is created by assembly itself, even though it may not be clear exactly what the aim of the gathering is (even to those within the group), or the aims may be contested within the group. However, Butler argues that the coming-together of bodies in the street to protest is an instantiation of a right of assembly—the right being created by the gathering, rather than by a pre-existing law bestowed by government. Such assemblies are always a particular formation of "the people," of popular sovereignty, because they bring to light that the legitimacy of government depends upon the continued support of the population. Popular sovereignty becomes visible when assemblies highlight a withdrawal of support for government. No assembly can claim to be fully representative of a population and yet "the people," or at least "a people," is created in the act of collectively resisting. In the rise and fall of such movements state legitimacy is continually tested, and thus democracy is played out. Again, this is not to say that every assembly of bodies on the street is democratic, but those demonstrations aimed at showing where a government is failing a population or group are occasions when groups rise up to be counted as "the people" and can be considered democratic.

The final chapter considers the notion of the good life, and asks "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" Here, Butler is concerned with Adorno's work on ethics and sociality in the context of inequality and precarity: "it makes sense to ask, which social configuration of 'life' enters into the question, how best to live?" (195). The question, Butler argues, depends upon people being able to follow the path of life that they consider valuable, which requires that the wider social conditions will be favorable to the life of their choosing. Yet, under conditions of precarity, does such a question of the good life disappear, given that there is a requirement to live day-to-day and hand-to-mouth? Butler argues that it does not—we still feel our responsibilities and ethical obligations, even under extreme conditions in which we are struggling for survival. However, going back to Arendt's conception of these struggles for

survival as pre-political, Butler argues again that this view artificially disposes of the private realm and the body in favor of pushing the notion of independent, autonomous political actors. Thus, these conditions of dependency need to be part of the conversation, not because dependency is necessarily a *good* thing, but because it is how we find ourselves in the world and the means through which we must find a good life. According to Adorno, a bad life must be resisted: we cannot just carve out what good we can in the midst of a bad life. However, attempting the latter may be a form of resistance in itself, Butler argues, and the social movements that struggle against precarity seek to institute new forms of dependency that are less precarious and more liveable, precisely by drawing attention to bodies and their needs.

In sum, Butler's book is a highly interesting foray into theorizing plural action and assembly, both as a specific type of social formation and as something politically relevant. The book sits at a crossroads of political theory, social theory, and ethics, and manages to bring interesting perspectives to each. Butler's "notes" circle around the notions of our bodily dependency, social relationships, and infrastructure, not as inherently good or bad, but as the conditions for political action, as well as the content of it. Butler therefore seeks to show that foregrounding interdependency can lead us to form alliances across identity boundaries, as we see the conditions that affect us are echoed in the precariousness experienced by others, and we understand our obligations as shared. When people come together to protest or resist precarity, they are creating a political space that relies upon plural action, that is not universal or unanimous, but that seeks, at times haphazardly, to institute the conditions of a better life in a particular context. This positive impetus of the theory will be welcomed by many, even where readers do not fully subscribe to the underlying understanding of precarity and neoliberalism. Understanding that forms of political resistance, particularly protest and assembly, depend on how the body is located may seem like an obvious, and therefore uninteresting, thing to highlight; however, by drawing attention to the body in political and social contexts from various perspectives, the book leaves its reader with a sense of just how little attention we give to the body when we think about politics, and makes a good case for reversing this trend.