

Gender and Sexuality:

An Interview with Judith Butler

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INTRODUCTION

Our guest tonight is an American philosopher and gender theorist. The guest has written a great deal about topics concerned with political philosophy, gender, ethics, sexuality and psychoanalyses in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, *Undoing Gender*, *Precarious Life*, *Gender Trouble* and many articles and videos, some of which was translated into Arabic at Hekmah. Prof. Judith Butler, welcome to Hekmah journal.

More than 30 years following the release of “Gender Trouble”, what are the common misconceptions about the book?

JB: First, let me thank you very much for the offer of this interview. I am glad to appear within the pages of Hekmah. As you may know, *Gender Trouble* has been translated into nearly 25 languages, and every translation produces a new book, a new set of possibilities for reading. So the question emerges, what is the difference between a new possibility for

reading a text and a misreading of the text? Within the field of deconstructive literary criticism, we could close the question right away and simply claim, every reading is a misreading. But that is perhaps too quick and easy. Almost every translation produces new meanings because the language of the text is now new, and it carries different connotations and connections. So every translation denies whatever intention I had in writing the book, since the author works mainly within an illusion of authorial control. At the same time, every translation is a gift. It gives me back something from another language that I never anticipated. So I lose control as an author only to find my language altered and enlarged by another language.

That said, there are perhaps three main points that have been misconstrued, but even those “errors” are interesting. The first is that gender is freely chosen. The second is that gender is fully determined. Indeed, readers of the book can finish the book with either of those conclusions, but my point was to insist that gender is shaped by norms, but not determined by norms, and that the scene of “cultural construction” gives rise to forms of agency that are not reducible to individual liberty. The other problem that emerges for some readers of the text is that it seems to deny the materiality of the body. My point was to say that the materiality of the body cannot be fully separated from the cultural terms through which it is lived. This does not mean that there is no materiality, but that we find materiality in lived forms of life shaped by culture.

Since then, your method of documentation was described as difficult, revolutionary, beyond existing grammar, regression in philosophical writing to the Hegelian/Heideggerian/Lacanian or difficult to read. Do you agree on some of these comments? And is the present language not adequately efficient to philosophize?

JB: When we speak about “the present language” we usually have some specific language in mind. If it is English, then yes, I am glad to push the grammatical boundaries of English. This is done perhaps more beautifully through poetry and experimental prose, but theory

also has to push against the way that grammar tends to order our thought. In some languages, there is no word for “gender” so it appears as an American import, as if it were the linguistic equivalent of McDonalds. I hope I have not contributed to American cultural imperialism. I find it interesting when people work within non-English languages to find ways of approaching the idea of gender, even if it is not the same as English. “Gender” should not belong to English, but should always be subject to the transformations that go with translation.

What do you think of Derrida's works on ethics now that a couple of decades have elapsed and the world has changed? Do you still think that ethics are always "indeterminate" given the absence of political will and the general decay of civil society?

JB; Derrida, even though he is gone, still reminds us that we can posit an ideal of justice even if the world does not materialize that ideal at the present time. We have always to live as if there could be justice, and in this way he continues to offer a philosophy of hope, even a commitment to principle.

Your main intellectual works are inconceivable without the post-structuralism traditions. In many post-structuralist accounts, interactivity, performativity, and all similar stuff can only be understood as a synchronic or a temporal "system" which has no real history. Recently, you are focusing on politics and totalitarianism which are generally historically-oriented fields. What are the adjustments you had made to your methodology and approach?

JB: Because I am not trained in the social sciences, and because I am a philosopher who has been profoundly shaped by the traditions of both critical theory and post-structuralism (Hegel, feminism, and psychoanalysis as well), I do not claim to have, or to follow, a single methodology. I try to allow the object of analysis to assume primacy, and

then I make the adjustments in theory as I go. I have not worked very much on Foucault, for instance, in the last years because the forms of power we are witnessing were not fully imagined in his texts. So I sometimes bring theories together in a syncretistic way, or I foreground one theoretical framework when it suits the historical reality. I am trying always to bring the resources I have to address present situations such as war, precarity, statelessness, violence, gender, sexuality, religion and secularism. Some of the ways of thinking about temporality developed from within the post-structuralist framework can be transposed into historical analysis. How do we, for instance, track the different iterations of gender norm within a society, or across societies? How do we approach nations that consider themselves to be social totalities even when they are defined precisely by what they exclude? How do we hold onto a notion of justice under conditions where the legal system is violent and unjust? How do we think about abandoned populations and those who are “left to die”? This was one of Foucault’s question, arguably post-structuralist, and it resonates with the situation where some populations are targeted by weapons or, indeed, targeted with policies of neglect and abandonment. If someone claims that their social identity is “natural” then how do we think about the distinction between what is social and what is natural? Is this a necessary binary, or do we need to think it differently, especially in cultural settings where nature is imbued with cultural and religious meanings?

Your work has been controversial. Scholars like Nancy Frazier, Geoff Boucher and Martha Nusbbaum had provided some critique from different aspects which could be summarized in three points:

- A- Butler’s theoretical framework is incapable of providing satisfactory answers to the normative questions. For instance; why gender subversion is desirable?**
- B- Butler’s uncritical acceptance of Derrida’s deconstruction of speech act theory has weakened the infrastructure of her performativity theory due to the significant limitations of Derrida’s concept of “citationality”.**
- C- Butler’s perception for resistance is always imagined as personal, more or less private, involving no organized public action for legal or institutional change.**

What is your response to the above critiques?

JB: These criticisms are from some time ago, although I do not know Geoff Boucher and only learn of this criticism now. But I am happy to respond. In 1989, *Gender Trouble* was published and much of my work since then has sought to revise or expand the thesis but also to turn to other topics in ethics and political philosophy. The critiques you mention all reference the work published nearly 30 years ago, and I have spent some time trying to respond and revise, as you can imagine. Fraser's critique from those years was that I sought to produce new possibilities for gender (gendered life, gender identity), but that I did not have a way to distinguish among good and bad possibilities. My answer is twofold: (1) I do not think that genders can be right or wrong unless they are felt to be by the person who has been assigned a gender that does not work for them. (2) I do argue that for some people who live and suffer outside the norms of gender that opening up new possibilities is good precisely because it makes life more livable. The point of gender subversion is not to celebrate subversion as an end in itself, but to make life more livable for those who have found gender norms to be restrictive and painful.

The idea that I have taken on Derrida's idea of citationality uncritically would come as a surprise to those Derrideans who accuse me of making use of Derrida for my own purposes. But this is how criticism works: sometimes one is criticized from opposite sides. My argument is that Foucault's account of power can be improved through the use of Derrida's theory of citationality. When we claim, with Foucault, that power and discourse produce a subject, we have to show how that production takes place. What Derrida shows us is that the repetition of norms do not always produce the same result. So we can see, for instance, how the reiteration of norms that govern national or sexual identities may well open up new possibilities in the course of that repetition. I see norms as historically sedimented, and Derrida does not address that issue, so I take my distance from Derrida when I find insufficiencies there.

The Nussbaum "criticism" seemed to be based on opinions and observations of her own, but did not take shape as a set of actual arguments. This is unusual for a philosopher, but I gather the point of her criticism was mainly polemical. *Gender Trouble* was part of

a LGBTQ movement, one which I had been part of for several years, and it was part of activist projects concerning HIV funding, opposition to sodomy laws, and demands for public recognition for LGBTQ people. I was myself part of several organizations, and my activism as part of the Palestinian Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment movement is well-known, as is my engagement with the Center for Constitutional Rights, the undocumented, the stateless, and the fight to preserve the academic freedom of scholars under censorship in several countries. Revisions in both legal and psychiatric codes were influenced not only by Gender Trouble, but by the entire field of queer theory of which it is a part. And it opened up such debates on the relation between theatricality and politics as well. It is true, of course, that Gender Trouble did not lay out a political program or strategy, but much of the subsequent work on politics surely has.

During the spring of 1998, you did an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, Pheng Cheah, and Drucilla Cornell in *diacritics*. In that interview, you denied the influence of Luce Irigaray in your works. Some scholars think that your denial of Luce Irigaray's influence is due to the trend against "essentialism" in the humanities in the '90s. In the '80s, American feminism was riveted by a war between pro- and anti-essentialist feminists. Both sides had a foothold. By the '90s, gender studies and deconstruction had helped anti-essentialism become the dominant strain of academic feminism. These scholars claim that you wanted to distance yourself from feminists like Irigaray, who were associated with "essentialism". What is your response to this claim?

JB: At the time I was firmly in the camp of those who were arguing for anti-essentialism. I did read Irigaray's work and I have taught it. I think she is quite brilliant, and there are ways to read her that are not essentialist. I think those debates are no longer quite as alive as they used to be. Now people argue about whether identity can be the ground of a

political position, and I continue to suggest that identity is not the ground, though it can be very important in organizing a political position.

Consumerism is pan-endemic in real and virtual life, how does this affect empowerment VS disempowerment?

JB: In the first instance, there is a radical disparity among those who have money and those who do not, so even though consumerism is attractive across class lines, only some can start to satisfy those desires. What is most worrisome is that desires are produced through advertisements that promise a happier and better life, and this leads people to squander their resources trying to buy consumer goods that promise happiness. Of course, no object can satisfy in that way, and the promise is always false. And yet many people without means are exploited by corporations and advertisement that seeks to produce and exploit their desire for a better life. The only answer for a better life is to be found in a more equitable organization of the economy, one with a primary commitment to alleviating poverty, illiteracy, and statelessness.

The British psychoanalysts Melanie Klein is very present in your writing and lectures. If the question to be generalized: to what extent psychoanalyses influenced philosophy/philosophers? You might also comment on the Martin Popper position from Freud in Vienna, who was an influential figure in your early life introductory and the rejection of Karl Popper of Psychoanalyses as Science?

JB: Klein is interesting to me because she accepts that destruction is there at the heart of human passions. For anyone seeking to construct an ethical philosophy that seeks to minimize violence, it is important to take into account the origins and aims of destruction so that these dispositions are not realized in violent acts and practices. She is profoundly realistic about the human psyche, and that seems useful to me during these times. She also

accepts that human beings are bound to one another through relations of inter-dependency, offering us an implicit critique of individualism.

Popper's critique of psychoanalysis as unscientific relies on an account of science as positivism. So he is right: psychoanalysis is not a positivism. In German, "wissenschaft" – science – refers to both the human and natural sciences. It describes a form of inquiry that seeks to grasp its object, even if that inquiry is not positivistic. Freud himself offered us a strong account of interpretation in his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and this is important for understanding the link between the interpretive social sciences and literary criticism, for instance. He understood that the unconscious could only appear in the form of signs and symptoms, and that this meant that we had to become readers to understand the unconsciousness. It cannot be found as a "fact" or "a set of facts" and so proves that positivism is inadequate as an approach to the human psyche.

How do you view the gender-pathologizing in mainstream psychiatry? On the other hand, psychoanalyses commonly viewed as an asset to feminism movement?

JB: Most psychiatry right now is not psychoanalytic, moving toward other models of the mind, and away from the "talk therapy" of Freud. Of course, Freud could not imagine all the possible forms of psychological suffering, especially those produced by historical events that post-date his theory. But some forms of psychoanalysis, especially ego psychology, have survived in the United States because they confirm the ideal of a self-determining individual as well as the necessity for an individual to conform or adapt to society as it is. These are conservative movements. One also finds normative ideas of how to live as a gender in some psychoanalytic positions, including the Lacanian ones. There is the idea of the normal and the pathological, and I am critical of this distinction. Feminism can find psychoanalysis useful to the extent that psychoanalysis shows how much of our conscious lives is shaped by fantasy. We can understand how our cultures work, how sexuality and violence work, in part by asking what fantasies govern their

operation. But we can also imagine different worlds, engage in utopian speculation, and contest accepted norms through the work of fantasy, especially in art.

Psychoanalyses general view, including M Klein's position in "The Emotional life of Civilized Man and Women" 1936 by M Klein and J Riviere, if I understand it correctly, is that anger, frustration and rage might not be articulated but through violence. If this is not the case, then how it can be articulated other means than violence?

JB: It is true that Klein does not believe we can simply get rid of the destructive aspects of our nature. But we can come to affirm more deeply the social connections we have with one another, and come to see that the world is defined, in part, through interdependent relations in the sphere of culture, economics, and politics. So as much as we might wish to destroy those who injure us, we also have to think about our desire to preserve the socially complex nature of this world. For Klein, we are beset by conflicting desires, and this is good, since then the urge to turn our anger into violence can be checked by another urge, the one that wishes to preserve the socially complex world.

How do you view Franz Fanon's work "The Wretched of the Earth" and his idea of "justified violence?"

JB: I am always teaching Fanon, and I wrestle with his writings all the time. It is interesting to see the difference between *Black Skins, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. In the first book, he is asking for a Black man to be recognized as man, seeking to become part of a humanity that does not divide and hierarchize people on the basis of race. In the second book, especially in the essay "Concerning Violence" he seems to argue that only through violence does he stand a chance of becoming a man. One can ask about whether "man" means human or whether it the gendered position of masculinity, and that is very important to understand the difference between the two. In "Concerning Violence" he is making the

case for the overthrow of colonialism so that the distinction between colonizer and colonized will be destroyed. So even there, there is an anticipation of equality, a wish for a form of co-habitation after colonial power is dissolved. His wager is that violence can remain an instrument or a means for the realization of both freedom and equality. I have several questions about this. We may wish for violence to be a means, and not an end, but every act of violence makes the world more violent. Violence has a way of becoming contagious, reproducing itself, becoming a way of life. So though I understand his argument, and have enormous sympathy with his aims, I am not quite convinced that violence can remain a mere instrument.

If we moved to Kafka, whom you have given about a number of lectures as lecturer in the European Graduate School, do you see some novelists as gifted philosophers? Or do they have to be interpreted and philosophized?

JB: Kafka shows that philosophical questions can be posed through literary works, but he also shows that questions of law can sometimes be best approached through literary forms such as the parable. If we try to understand the law – what grounds the law? What does the law require? – we become readers of the law, trying to scrutinize its internal logic and truth. But in some ways the power of law cannot be fully accessed. It works with a kind of force that is not fully justified, and so our efforts to enter the law remain frustrated. But there is an even more important point to make here. So many refugees now wait “before the law” – they are waiting in camps, indefinitely detained. They live in a world in which they may or may not get permission to move, to settle, to work, to become a citizen, and there is no guarantee that they will be able to move. Consider the astonishing situation in the refugee camps in Lebanon where so many Palestinians have lived for generations. They begin and end life in a condition of indefinite detention. Kafka helps us to fathom such a life, and its injustice.

In your article “What is Critique” what makes rethinking critique a necessity or a virtue?

JB: It may be that one tries to offer a perspective that is radically censored or that seems irrational or that risks making you seem like a monster. In those moments, we are considered to be outside of the reigning regime of intelligibility. At such moments, we can become silent or accept that we have a psychiatric problem, or, if we are convinced of the justice of what we say, we can continue to speak and act. It is best if we do that with others so that we can build an alternative sense of what political reality is, and because we need solidarity in order to survive. So yes, critique takes courage and company.

How do Foucault’s views on the “Stylization of Morality” in the “Art of Living” give way to new freeing possibilities?

JB: I am not sure. I just know that too often those positions are assimilated to a form of individualism, and I think that is a problem. We have to ask what freedom means, and whether it should be defined as freedom from all constraint. What interests me is how we work within the terms of constraint to produce new possibilities. After all, we emerge into the world with histories, as part of cultures and affiliations that are important dimensions of who we are. We reproduce those worlds at the same time that we sometimes find ways to open up possibilities. We can call that practice “stylization.”

Chomsky divided Zionism as early benign stage, with which he identifies himself, and the Zionism of the present which he rejects. To what extent do you agree with his categorical classification? Why does the critique of Zionism remain a difficult subject to discuss?

JB: Chomsky distinguished between a cultural Zionism that existed prior to the 1967 war and a political Zionism. Cultural Zionism in Europe did not wish to take land or build a

state, but only to renew a spiritual community. Political Zionism sought to take land and build a state. In 1948, political Zionism obviously won. There was a continuing resistance to the Israeli state project on the part of cultural Zionists, even though they clearly benefitted from becoming citizens of Israel. It was within the writings of cultural Zionists that we could see a distinctly Jewish effort to imagine a binational state. That vision remains alive only for a small minority within the Israeli left. The problem even then is that it was mainly Jewish Zionists imagining the binational state – they were not doing that in concert with Palestinians. So I am neither a cultural Zionist nor a political Zionist, since I am in favor of a binationalism, or a new state formation, that will be built by all the people on that land, and that will honor the Palestinian right of return.

How can we better understand the Palestinian/Israeli conflict through concept of precarity?

JB: I am not sure. But if you consider how both electricity and water are rationed by the State of Israel to Gaza, then you can see how “induced precarity” works. Or if you consider how many Palestinian youth are imprisoned, injured, or killed, you can see how a population is treated as dispensable, differentially exposed to precarious conditions, made to live precarious lives.

In your book "Parting Way: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism", you made the distinction between the two. To what extent do you think that Arabs make this distinction? And how the issue can be better approached?

JB: I am not sure which “two” you are speaking about? But if it is the distinction between cultural and political Zionism, then perhaps it is good to know that Zionism became equated with Israeli state power in time, but that in its origin, many Zionists were against a state for the Jewish people.

Is writing about these subjects (politics & psychology) in an integrative way a "Born Again Frankfurt School"?

JB: I do think that the Frankfurt School sought to understand the historical demands of their world through making recourse to interdisciplinary study, and that we are now in a different historical situation, faced with a wide range of demands. So we need to call into question strict disciplinary distinctions, or learn how best to speak across them, in order to be responsive to our historical world. They pointed out that many knowledge projects simply reproduce the existing forms of power in society. If we want to transform society in the direction of justice, then we will need to find our own transnational mode of critical theory.

You are well liked in the Arabic world not only among feminists, but equally well liked because of your position in the Palestine/Israeli conflict. Your association in some work with Arabs or Muslims thinkers like Edward Sa'aid, Talal Asad and others. Do you follow Arabic/Muslim feminism in the Middle East? In particular, the Saudi feminist movement that has been going on for a quite a while in social media?

JB: Yes, I do try to follow feminism in the Arab world, and I rely on many of my friends who speak Arabic to learn what is happening. I also spent some time with the Gender and Women's Studies Program at Bir Zeit and learned a great deal about what the students wanted to study, and what their questions about feminism were. I have also been involved with the Jenin Freedom Theatre, and learned there about feminist struggles within the community of Jenin. I am very interested in Muslim feminist movements, how they define their aims and the basis of their solidarity. One of the most important struggles feminists have is to combat the extreme Islamophobia in some European, Australian, and US circles. I have learned a great deal about religion and secularism from Talal Asad and Saba

Mahmood, and that continues to inform my thinking now. Of course, I am, like many people, indebted to Edward Said whose courage and intelligence was exemplary.

The majority of contemporary philosophers are familiar with Judaeo-Christian mythology and history which is well represented in their work. Yet, other religions, including other Abrahamic religion such as Islam, are absent. To what extent do you think this affects the readers from other religions? Especially when philosophers address culture universality?

JB: This is a huge question and I cannot do justice to it here. But yes, we find time and again within the Western canon of philosophy references to Judeo-Christian values that assume that they define Western rationality and set the limits to ideas of universality. Islam is very often absent, as are many of the religions from South and East Asia. Many philosophers are now engaged in a critique of these presuppositions. There are two interesting contradictions here. First, many of the great Greek classics depended for their transmission on Islamic scholars and institutions, so we would not have much of Aristotle if it were not for Islam. Second, for those who seek to defend the idea of universality at the same time that they exclude Islam from its terms, they show that their version of universality is a contradiction in terms. It is a parochial or provincial idea of the universal. We are still waiting for a true universality.

You previously had written about the [election of president Trump](#), which was translated into Arabic in [Hekmah](#), 9 months have passed thus far since the inauguration, what do you want to add?

JB: Perhaps we have to consider how new forms of fascism and authoritarianism are different from those that dominated the 20th century. We cannot take the older historical instance as the basis of a current definition. The struggle against Trump is a national one, but also transnational, since his tactics are shared by many regimes across the world. We

have seen how demonstrations and assemblies are called “riots” in Egypt, Turkey, Palestine, and Venezuela, how forms of power emerge that are hostile to constitutional democracy, stepped in nationalisms and racism, serving the power of the corporate elites. We have to reclaim our countries, but we also have to act and think in a transnational way. Trump the man should become less interesting and shocking than Trump the regime. As a regime, he is a transnational phenomenon, and we require a transnational movement that will renew radical democratic politics for our time.