

Gender, Politics, Solidarity

Gerry Kearns

Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism, by Judith Butler, Columbia

University Press, 251 pp, €28.99, ISBN: 978-0231146104

Israel/Palestine and the Queer International, by Sarah Schulman, Duke University Press, 193 pp, €21.50, ISBN: 978-0822353737

On September 11th, 2012, Judith Butler received the Adorno Prize, awarded by the city of Frankfurt each year on the anniversary of the birth of the Marxist Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno and honouring individuals who have distinguished themselves in the fields of music, aesthetics, or philosophy to which Adorno himself had made so singular a contribution, beginning and ending with his work in the university at Frankfurt. Butler is an influential philosopher and her books have engaged questions of recognition, identities, and desire in relation to gender and sexuality. She was a worthy choice for the Adorno Prize and the press was on hand to snap her evident delight. Yet some friends of Israel thought her a controversial choice because she has accepted the request of a host of Palestinian institutions that Israel be visited with a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign similar to that which was employed against the apartheid regime of South Africa. This demand for solidarity raises complex issues and Butler has been forward in examining and clarifying them for other academics, by extending the insights reached in her earlier philosophical works.

Butler's philosophical works are always political. Her doctoral dissertation (published as *Subjects of Desire* by Columbia University Press in 1987) was on the treatment of Hegel in postwar French philosophy, but her central concern was the ways that desire and recognition were related. This incited the young lesbian to insist that human flourishing required that diverse forms of desire be recognised as valid and fully human. In extending the work of her dissertation for publication, she supplemented its consideration of phenomenologists and existentialists by taking up the post-structuralist challenge of Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault. The works of Michel Foucault have continued to engage and reward Butler as she has reflected upon the regulation of life by government (what Foucault called biopolitics) and upon the body as a site of repression and resistance.

Her second book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), has been her most influential to date. In it she troubled binaries within the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. In each case she insisted

upon the validity of multiple categories, not even to be accommodated along any continuum between two poles. In a dramatic queering of the melancholia that Freud described as following from the incest taboo, Butler explored the implications of the son not only losing the mother to the possessive father but likewise losing the father too, and conversely the daughter not only replicating the mother to woo the father but seeking in other women something denied because appropriated by her father. The homosexual taboo might excite as easily as incite. Beyond this, she argued (both in *Gender Trouble* and in *Bodies that Matter*, 1993) that the allure of drag showed both that gender was a performance and that the person in drag must needs be understood as embodying two genders, the one in the guise of the other, and not as the resolution of gender into the one being dressed into. Because we enter a world of representations we take up but do not create, gender and sexuality are essentially performances we must repeat, having first learned them, and, because we are always copying earlier versions, there is yet scope for things to be spoiled, even deliberately. Parody permits an ironic distance from the seeming naturalness of the predominant binaries within gender, sexuality, and sex.

Butler has returned time and again to the matter of recognition and stressed the inter-relationships between its social, psychic, and political registers. In *Bodies that Matter*, she reflected upon the forms of community that are made out of acts of recognition. The Names Project with its AIDS quilt, for example, asserted not only that the lives taken by the new and cruel epidemic were worthy of being grieved but it also helped sustain a community out of this collective pain. The drag scene as represented in the documentary film *Paris is Burning* (directed by Jennie Livingston, 1990), was, suggested Butler, perhaps less radical in contesting the binary of gender than in acts of imagination that allowed new forms of elective kinship, the families you choose. Communities, and not necessarily healthy ones, can be grounded in general acts of psychic identification. In *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press, 1997), Butler wrote of a sort of social melancholia that proceeds from the common homophobic denial that one has ever felt love for persons of one's own sex. If the love cannot be admitted then, its loss cannot be reflected upon and people experience what Butler terms foreclosure, a sense of a "loss that cannot be grieved because it cannot be recognized as loss, because what is lost never had any entitlement to existence". The repression of disallowed drives constitutes a form of self-denial that is akin to a death instinct. Foreclosure, withholding the recognition of a common humanity from some sorts of persons, can be self-destructive because in limiting our capacity to reach out we install a dangerous aggression within.

Butler is explicit about the political purchase of her philosophical work. *Excitable Speech* (1997) wove itself around issues of pornography and of the acceptance of gay men and lesbians into the US military. At one level the book was about the performativity of speech (can mere words actually produce effects by virtue of mere utterance) but at another it is an argument against understanding pornography as hate speech and an exasperated elaboration of the implicit claim that merely by articulating their sexuality, gay and lesbian soldiers were inflicting some sort of assault upon their straight colleagues (hence “don’t ask, don’t tell”). Butler’s general point was that speech could only produce effects given particular contexts and the powers external to speech that can enforce its claims. Thus a judge might pronounce sentence upon someone determined to be guilty of murder but only with a legal system, only with jails, only with prison warders, only with taxes raised to pay for all of these, was the sentence anything more than a person in a wig reading a script. If that is the case, then, we might examine the contexts in which pornography or gay disclosure are held to produce their pernicious effects and then we might consider whether under other circumstances they do not produce such effects or even how things might now be arranged so that pernicious consequences do not follow. If the presence of a gay man can panic his fellow soldier, then, perhaps the unreasonable fears of the fellow soldier need to be addressed rather than allowing the employment rights of the gay soldier to be curtailed.

Butler is cautious of the regulation of sexuality by the state. In a brilliant excursus from the *Antigone* of Sophocles, she follows George Steiner in asking how psychoanalysis would have been different were it to have taken the incestuous troubles of Antigone rather than those of Oedipus as its founding myth, Antigone being the daughter of the unwittingly incestuous marriage of Oedipus with his mother, Jocasta. Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim* (Columbia University Press, 2000) is an audacious entertainment and she uses it to ask for a feminism that confronts the state rather than one that uses the state to back feminist claims. Faced with Creon’s injunction that she not bury Polynices, her brother, Antigone defied a law that foreclosed her right to grieve, that produced her brother’s life as not having been worth the living. With *Antigone*, Butler notes an urgent desire for the recognition of kinship, disallowed by attempts to fit every relation into the model of the nuclear family. Polynices is judged unnatural in having killed his brother in a battle for control of the homeland from which he had been expelled, and Antigone’s attachment to him is considered unnatural in that she is sister not only to him but also to his father. Yet she still demands social recognition of her ties to Polynices even as they are proclaimed illegitimate by government. Just as the drag

queens asserted kinship by choice so, says Butler, Antigone must stand for kinship under extremity. It recalls for Butler the difficulty with which African-American slaves developed kin relations in the face of the social death imposed by rape or sale.

If a community holds certain sorts of lives to be invalid then, some people experience prejudice and, being unloved, may accept a judgment that only the exceptional dare defy. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler examines again the binary assumptions of biological sex and the heterosexist assumptions of Western kinship and encourages us to accept that there are more types of persons and relations than are acknowledged by convention. Butler takes the struggles to provide a safe space and life-path for intersex children as indicative of the ways we will ever have to expand our notion of what we accept as human. This too is a person and one deserving of love and acceptance without the sanction and surgery of compulsory reduction to a model of a stereotypically male or female appearance. We must remain open to the demands for recognition made by people wishing to live gender in ways more various than the simple binary. Some people experience transgender as a wish to be reassigned to the gender they feel most comfortable in, with or without the surgery that transsexual people might request. For others, the interstitial is itself their comfort zone. She notes the efforts of the Vatican to have gender removed from human rights documents on the ground that sex is natural and is designed as a binary for the purposes of reproduction.

This is among the most confessional of Butler's books. She talks of having turned to philosophy in search of models for ways to live. The issues of gender and sexuality that she took up resonated with the challenges she felt society visited upon her as a woman, as a woman loving other women, and as a person comporting herself as butch. She saw gay cousins ostracised by the family, a transsexual uncle confined to an institution, and all around her she saw violence against women, against gay men and lesbians. Butler roams across philosophy, psychoanalysis and politics in her interrogation of what we tell ourselves about what it means to be human and part of a community. *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005) concerns the stories we tell others about who we are, stories that are in fact pleas for recognition, for love, and for a share of the material and emotional resources that sustain life. Reflecting upon our own vulnerability, we should acknowledge the harm we can do to others and thus we have an ethical responsibility to seek recognition in ways that limit the harm we might do to others.

Recognition has been perhaps the central theme in Butler's work. This immediately places the subject in the face of another, or rather of a group of others. The social and prior nature of norms is important for Butler. It is also material that these norms are reproduced through being enacted, allowing, then, that they might be enacted differently. This work of transforming norms can be ventured by particularly brave persons, but generally these special people are sustained by social movements. Learning and risking are collective and Butler's philosophy has always served and been sustained by feminist and queer activism. The recent turn in her activism towards Israel/Palestine is what brought out the virulent denunciations of the honour paid to her in Frankfurt last September.

After 9/11 and more particularly after George W Bush launched the interminable Global War on Terror, Butler began to consider how her reflections upon recognition might implicate US foreign policy. Butler noted the arrogant asymmetry of the US response to the murder of some three thousand residents in the attacks of September 11th, 2001. Instead of reflecting upon the risk of international terrorism more generally and asking how the world could be made safer, the US insisted that it could unleash violence anywhere it chose in order to make itself invulnerable to future attack. Butler's point is that to insist on the right to kill innocents abroad to protect innocents at home is unjust, and probably ineffective too. When states take lives it is usually done with regret and a certain respect for the condemned person. However, in the Global War on Terror, the US has bombed, invaded and killed without even counting the dead. This failure to respect those killed extended even to the US dead, smuggled back to the homeland without ceremony or press coverage. In *Precarious Life* (Verso, 2004), Butler insisted that recognising our common vulnerability could be a way for states to develop international solidarity to detect and apprehend terrorists. Instead, the projection of unbridled force overseas produces a geopolitics of life and death where death is visited upon people in spaces identified as uncivilised and life is the right only of those resident in civilized spaces.

In the midst of this book about the biopolitics of the Global War on Terror, Butler had a chapter on "The Charge of Anti-semitism: Jews, Israel and the Risks of Public Critique". As she developed her criticisms of US foreign policy, she was drawn to recognise the ways it had been prefigured by Israel's policy of occupying Palestinian lands and then characterising resistance to their illegal occupation as uncivilised acts of terrorism. She came to consider justified the call of Palestinian civil society for, among other things, an academic boycott of Israeli state institutions, except where they had taken public stances against the occupation. She supported also the request that universities should divest themselves of investments in

companies that sustain the occupation. She was told that the boycott, disinvestment and sanctions campaign threatened the existence of Israel and that she was, as such, effectively an anti-Semite. She noted that the charge was particularly painful to a Jewish person such as herself and she called upon others for a collective response that would create space for a principled criticism of the Israeli occupation in the face of these bullying tactics from people styling themselves as friends of Israel. In response to similar attacks, Naomi Klein has asked if the friends of Israel really mean that were it to accept international law and end its illegal occupation then the state would cease to exist. Butler herself has questioned the conflation of the state of Israel with the interests of all Jewish people.

The similarities of US and Israeli biopolitics and geopolitics were even more to the fore in *Frames of War* (Verso, 2009). Her central concern is with the structures for cognition that make state violence imaginable or so acceptable as to be invisible. In one of his luminous essays advocating nuclear disarmament, Edward Thompson called for writing that could renew the raw nerve of outrage. Outrage is a vital resource but it can be mobilised for racist as easily as human rights agendas. Butler insists that a common focus on our unavoidable vulnerability can help build international solidarity. Since violence demeans both victim and perpetrator, we might begin by cultivating a stronger sense of guilt with respect to the violence in which our own states are complicit. Beyond that, we must attend to any framing of civilisations as better or worse than each other. This is always dangerous and Butler describes how in France the dominant perception of Islamic culture as lacking strong father figures was used to imply that childish Muslims need discipline from the state. She recalls that, at one point, the Netherlands had a citizenship test that asked Muslims, but not Christians, about their attitudes towards homosexuality. These are ways of framing the Other as less civilised and thus deserving of only qualified admission to Western society.

In *Parting Ways*, Butler considers her Jewish heritage and Jewish affiliations. It is a remarkable book, generous, erudite, personal, and practical. Butler assumes that a Jewish criticism of Israeli state violence is not only desirable but possible. She finds resources in the Jewish thought of the Diaspora, notably in the writings of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and Primo Levi. In the Diaspora, Jewish people lived alongside people with very different religious and cultural preferences. Reflecting upon her experience of Nazi Germany, Hannah Arendt said that the Nazi crime was to act as if they had a right to decide with whom they would share the earth. Butler insists that “unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence”. In the 1930s, like many Jewish intellectuals from

Europe, Arendt saw the need for a new state to which Jewish people might safely flee from murderous Nazi tyranny. But Arendt did not want a Jewish state, nor did she want to found a state on a colonial land grab. She was an early critic of Israel's colonial expansion, and with other prominent Jewish-Americans including Albert Einstein she famously wrote to the *New York Times* in 1948 decrying Menachem Begin and his party as "the latest manifestation of fascism" (in her *Jewish Writings*, 1987). Arendt argued for a federal or even a binational structure for Israel, believing that no other outcome would give the state peace with its Arab neighbours. The alternative was a state of permanent war with external interests funding the Israeli war economy.

Arendt escaped from Nazi Germany and eventually found her way to the United States. Walter Benjamin and Primo Levi were unable to escape. In 1940 Benjamin took his own life at a border crossing when he realised that it was likely he would fall into German hands. Benjamin wrote brilliantly about the relations between states, modernity and violence. The history of the oppressed can illuminate parallel acts of violence in the present. Remembrance of violence past stands as rebuke to the normalising of state violence present. Benjamin appeals to a Jewish conception of messianic time against the linear, civilisational time of modernity, of state formation and elaboration. Memory and remembrance may help people attend to the pain of the many peoples who have suffered in and around the places in which ourselves now live. All those people with attachments to a place must be accommodated. Butler insists that making traditions for any place involves ceding ground to the resonances of previous occupants or current neighbours. This is, she concludes, "a process of cultural translation that is also a remapping of social bonds or indeed of geographical space itself". Our memory must be broad enough to make room for a learned affiliation with neighbours we never choose.

Levi was arrested as a partisan in Italy after the country had sued for peace with the Allies and the north had subsequently been occupied by the Nazis. He was sent to Auschwitz as a Jewish person and survived a year there before the Russian army liberated him. Memory was Levi's obsession, or perhaps, rather, his obligation. He had grown up an assimilated Jewish person in Turin but when Mussolini pandered to Hitler by passing race laws that closed universities and professions to Jewish people and prohibited intermarriage between Jewish people and other Italians, Levi was thrown back upon his Jewish roots and, indeed he began to meet with other Jewish Italians to explore the Jewish basis of a commitment to justice and liberty so that he might be a Jewish opponent and not just victim of Nazism. In 1947, Levi

published *If This is a Man*, probably the best testimony from what he called the *anus mundi*. Levi makes two points: first, since this has happened once, it can happen again; and, secondly, it happened through the systematic destruction of the evidence of humanity in its victims so that their murder was not the taking of a fully human life.

Three things distressed him later in life: that some had the nerve to deny that the murders of millions had happened, that some Israeli politicians used these murders as alibi for their own colonial ventures in Lebanon, and that in the service of this colonialism the Israeli state was complicit in the slaughter of refugees in camps at Sabra and Shatila (September 1982). Butler takes from Levi both the urgency of avoiding the racism that begins the denigration that leads to the camps and also the notion that the Jewish tradition might itself sustain a social justice perspective. This turns Jewish thought against the racism of Israeli colonialism.

The call for an international cultural and academic boycott of Israel raises questions about recognition that go to the heart of Butler's philosophical testimony and political activity. It is a call to non-violent action from scores of Palestinian civil society organisations. It asks that Israel obey international law and that in the meantime, it "urges academics, academics' associations/unions and academic institutions around the world, where possible and as relevant, to boycott and/or work towards the cancellation or annulment of events, activities, agreements, or projects that promote the normalization of Israel in the global academy, whitewash Israel's violations of international law and Palestinians' rights, or violate the boycott" (www.pacbi.org). Butler's support for the boycott is very important and she speaks regularly on it. At Brooklyn College, on February 7th, 2013, she took part, with Omar Baghouti (of PACBI, Ramallah) in a discussion of the boycott. This attracted the attention of a number of opponents of the boycott. Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz said that the event was a "violation of academic freedom" (*New York Daily News*, January 30th, 2013) since no opponent of the boycott was on the panel even though he himself had spoken against the boycott at the same college without any supporters of the boycott on his programme. Ten members of the City Council of New York threatened to defund the college since they object to public funds for "schools whose programs we, and our constituents, find to be odious and wrong" (*The Guardian*, February 4th, 2013).

The significance of Butler's advocacy is evident from Sarah Schulman's *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*. Schulman is an artist-activist and also Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York. She was active in the ACT UP movement in

New York City and has written novels about the experience (*People in Trouble*, 1990 and *Rat Bohemia*, 1995). She has also written non-fiction accounts of the heroic achievements of ACT UP in advocating with and for people with AIDS. In *My American History* (1994) she described the mass deaths and the abandonment of people with AIDS during the first decade of the epidemic until activists forced attention from state institutions and pharmaceutical companies. In *Stagestruck* (1998) she wrote of the ways that the commercial sponsorship of gay and lesbian culture might compromise its political independence, and she also gave a powerful example in the unacknowledged appropriation of elements of her novel, *People in Trouble*, to serve as the gay credibility for *Rent*, a musical that rewrote history to make concerned straight people the most effective campaigners for people with AIDS. Most recently, in *Gentrification of the Mind* (2012), she has described how the early death from AIDS of so many gay activists has allowed young people to grow up ignorant of all that an earlier generation of activists achieved and thus these young people cannot imagine what activism might achieve for them and their contemporaries. Schulman also notices that gentrification has produced less diverse urban neighbourhoods so that young people are less likely to have the challenging experiences that might educate them in the ways of promiscuous solidarity.

Like Butler, Schulman has a background in lesbian and queer activism and like Butler she is Jewish. In *Israel/Palestine* she writes of her hesitant education about the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This is a wonderful story of an activist learning a new realm of solidarity. Schulman was invited to speak to a lesbian and gay rights conference at Tel Aviv University and was at first minded to accept. She asked around her friends and was soon told about the boycott. She tells of the importance to her thinking of people she calls “credible”, that is people like herself who have “consistently produced artistically engaged work with authentic queer content and [...] treat other openly gay thinkers and artists with a recognition and respect denied them by the straight world”. Schulman emails Butler for advice and gets guidance, support and a reading list within four hours.

Schulman decides that she cannot ignore the Palestinian request even though this means that gays and lesbians in Israel may suffer. After conversation with queers in Israel she decides to make a solidarity visit. She will not speak at Israeli state institutions but will talk at unofficial venues and also arrange some events under auspices of Palestinian queer groups. Throughout her visit, she will emphasise that she supports the boycott. She also decides to request from the Palestinian boycott campaign some recognition that gay and lesbian groups are giving the

campaign their support and she will seek from the campaign a recognition that liberation for Palestinians will have to include feminist and queer priorities. While she is developing her agenda, Butler gives an interview on the boycott to *Haaretz* (February 25th, 2010).

Schulman's response is eloquent and moving testimony to the credibility of Butler: "I felt overwhelmed with pride and gratitude that someone with the integrity to be so out as a lesbian was taking the leadership that the rest of us needed, not just emotionally but practically. It had been a long time since I felt real leadership before me that I could rely on. I experienced a great feeling of relief to see and hear that other voice, that other face literally creating a context one day, for me, whereas the day before there was none."

After Schulman's visit to Israel/Palestine in 2010, she organizes a tour of six US cities for Palestinian queer activists in February 2011 and in April 2011 she shares a radio interview with Omar Baghouti and in the course of the interview this Palestinian spokesperson for PACBI announces that he is "against those who say let's delay women's rights. Especially if it comes with women's rights debates. Let's delay women's rights till after liberation. Nothing comes after liberation, either we start now in parallel or nothing will come after we end apartheid and occupation." Solidarity, reciprocity, and recognition here reinforce each other, broadening the range of human rights that each movement affirms. The queer activist learns about colonialism and the anti-occupation activist learns about feminism. It is a remarkable testament to the value of the risk that Schulman ran in agreeing to deny her lesbian and gay constituency in Israel in favour of a broader human rights agenda in which their rights too might find validation and defence. It is also testimony to the inspiration that flows from the credibility of Judith Butler.