Reflections on the Contemporary Public Sphere: An Interview with Judith Butler

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Abstract
In this conversation, Berkeley-based philosopher Judith Butler offers insights into her understanding of the public sphere and its current transformations as a core dimension of political subjectivity. Beginning with her own understanding of Habermas’ classic, the interview centers around its connection to other classical texts (e.g. of Hannah Arendt) and timely political debates.

Keywords
Black Lives Matter, identity politics, political subjectivity, structural transformation of the public sphere

While Jürgen Habermas, starting in his seminal work on The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and over the course of his subsequent work, conceptualizes discourse ethics through the validity of speech acts and the form of rationality, Judith Butler is more interested in the practical, i.e. performative dimensions, of speech and discourse, as well as the (in)visibilities and vulnerabilities it invariably equally relies on and causes. Following their project of a critical interrogation of philosophical and political universalism, Butler examines the implications and preconditions of such claims, although revealing a striking disinterest in the analysis of material inequalities, e.g. wealth and wages, education and labor. Starting with their work on the performative (post- or non-)ontology of gender, the discursive constitution of political agency has been at the center of Butler’s contribution to social and political theory. What seems particularly interesting about

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Butler’s conception of the public sphere is the genuine reformulation of the intimate nexus between the what, the how and the who of political deliberation, and its sociocultural constitution. By focusing on the discursive dimension of identity and subjectivity, and by her interventions as a public intellectual, Butler’s ideas have influenced not only feminist debates but shaped contemporary discussions in political theory regarding collective articulation, the role of (non-)violence, the constitution and construction of ‘the universal’, the subject of the political, and the recognizability of human life.

Against this background, and viewed from a sociological angle, the social construction of the public sphere, as well as the political positions it represents and specifically the role of speech in these processes, are overlapping topos in the oeuvres of Jürgen Habermas and Judith Butler. We are therefore honored and happy that Judith Butler, one of the most influential present-day philosophers, has agreed to answer a number of questions regarding their understanding of Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and beyond. Their remarks also shed light on their own conceptualization of the public sphere. The interview was conducted in a transatlantic email correspondence in June 2021.

*Martin Seeliger and Paula-Irene Villa Braslawsky:* What, in your opinion, are the central aspects of Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*? What do you consider its most significant contributions?

*Judith Butler:* Habermas shows his readers how the public sphere has developed over time, restricting himself in that book to its Greek and Roman origins and its subsequent development of as part of ordinary language, including policies pertaining to public interest. His method of reconstructing that history relies in part on etymologies and changes in usage, suggesting that such a method can give us substantial insights into historical change. At the same time, his approach not only documents the disintegration of the public sphere but argues in favor of a better conceptualization, one that demands a new set of usages, a further twist to the political etymology he has offered. The history he gives establishes when and how the distinction between public and private came to exist, casting a different light on that distinction than the one Hannah Arendt offers in *The Human Condition*. He refers to the ‘staging of publicity’, suggesting that it came to exist, and to change, according to the way in which it was staged, and the audiences before whom it was staged – and to whom it was addressed. The Church as well as courtly proceedings required forms of representation that established the ‘publicity’ of their rituals. The baroque palace, the castle park, were but two occasions in which aristocratic architecture opened to the broader public to demonstrate its grandeur. Only with the advent of national and territorial states do these theatrical rituals become ‘private’ events within social spaces separated from the state. This separation not only inaugurates the specifically modern distinction between public and private but also establishes ‘the public sphere’ as a liberal bourgeois one. The spaces deemed public are those into which ‘anyone’ can go, including those who are not invited to aristocratic dinners and parties. At the end of the 18th century, the ‘public’ becomes, he argues, the public authority, understood as separated from the aristocracy and the Church. The publicity once corralled by the estate system now becomes a product of states which seek to establish a
common sphere. That sphere, however, becomes primarily a bourgeois sphere, since even as it separates from the aristocracy, on the one hand, it fails to include the poor and marginalized, on the other. In fact, to the extent that the public sphere becomes identified with public authority and the intensification of administrative powers, it leads to new dynamics of regulation and exclusion.

Sometimes feminist and queer work relies upon a distinction between private and public that is simple, binary, and ahistorical. Michael Warner, among others, have pointed out the usefulness of Habermas’ historical inquiry into the public and private in order to remind us that reclaiming the public is a political ideal worth struggling for. Warner (2014) writes that Habermas does not set out to invent or celebrate a putatively lost idea of the public (though he has sometimes been read this way); he wishes to show that bourgeois society has always been structured by a set of ideals that were contradicted by its own organization and compromised by its own ideology. These ideals, however, contained an emancipatory potential, in Habermas’ view, and modern culture should be held accountable to them.

This becomes especially important when we realize that ‘the private’ does not just refer to the household but to private enterprise and industry, market values, and an array of capitalist powers that undermine public goods and public obligations. At the same time, issues such as sexuality, gender, and marriage should all be issues of public concern, even though they belong to the ‘domestic sphere’ which is, for some, the key component of the private sphere. Today we are dealing with new challenges, but some of them were rightly foreseen by Habermas. For him, the disintegration of the public sphere through market forces, and a corollary set of social contradictions, pose a threat to democracy itself.

MS & PV: How would you describe the contemporary public sphere? And, specifically, what do you think about fearless speech in the digital public sphere?

JB: I am not sure that we can speak about a single public sphere. Many scholars have suggested as much, including Craig Calhoun, Nancy Fraser, and Michael Warner. Even though the internet does, to a certain degree, produce a common field of representation, it does so unequally. The access to technology varies according to the relative wealth of nations and the priority each gives to making technology available to their publics. My sense is that a dynamic is currently in play in which various senses of the public are vying with one another for hegemonic power. It is important that we can establish a public understanding of events like those that have been so central to the Black Lives Matter movement, to the struggle for refugee lives, and struggles for democracy more broadly. None of us could expand our networks and solidarities without a digital public sphere. At the same time, I am not sure that the internet has become the only public sphere. If that were the case, then assemblies, demonstrations, encampments would only become ‘public’ once they were documented and circulated online. Of course, I am very mindful of the important role that digital media plays in our political culture. But when we start to speak of shelter, education, and health services as ‘public goods’ then we are not talking about concepts that are built by the internet, as much as we may require the internet to get the word out about just how important they are. When we
refer to ‘public goods’ in this way, we are trying to demonstrate what a public world could be. In this sense, there is a normative aspiration embedded in our rhetoric. I think it was this strain of Habermas’ thinking that inspired Michael Warner’s important and singular contributions to queer theory.

I find interesting Habermas’ brief reflections on theatricality and the production of literary cultures, even though I do not always agree with his formulations. He refers to theatre as representational, which it surely can be, but in the 17th- and 18th-century examples he gives, he imagines that theatre only represents those in power. What about popular forms of drama? What place do those have in his history? As he narrates that history, he suggests that what is happening at the level of representation is little more than effective advertising for a princely regime. The public sphere, on the other hand, becomes constituted through anti-theatrical means. But what if he has theatricality wrong? What, for instance, is its relation to performativity or uprising? In the 18th Brumaire, Marx also has his legitimate concerns about the reactionary and self-amplifying dimensions of theatricality. But surely it is necessary to distinguish among political senses of the theatrical. Habermas seems sure that theatre in Elizabethan England did little more than extoll the virtues of the wealthy in front of the poor. But what if theatre also played a role in the constitution of a new public sphere distinguished by its popular character, one de-linked from administrative powers, bourgeois cultural forms, and the history of aristocratic self-aggrandizement? It was an early Frankfurt School conceit, exemplified by Lukacs, that only the novel can properly exemplify the dialectical present and future of society, but Brecht clearly objected, as did Benjamin. The importance of epic theatre is but one counter-example, as is the primacy of ‘gesture’ in both Benjamin and Adorno. Indeed, if the distinguishing dialectical character of the novel requires that theatricality be cast as its regressive and reactionary Other, then not only is popular drama ruled out as a politically potent art form but so too is the role of performance, drama, and theatre in the creation of new public cultures. The work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Angela McRobbie from the Birmingham School all made a counter-argument to this claim, insisting on popular culture as a way to understand the intersections of gender, class, and race in contemporary capitalism.

**MS & PV:** With your book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* you contribute to the field of democratic theory by focusing on the role of public demonstrations. Your perspective on the centrality of bodies in space and the ‘right to appear’ is a timely and useful extension of the often idealist, abstract debate on the public sphere. Could you further elaborate on how you think social research, philosophy, and cultural studies might collaborate to deepen our understanding of the body in processes of public articulation and mobilization? How does this relate to concrete political dynamics, for example progressive, universalizing, inclusive movements such as #BLM, #niunamenos, #vivarnosqueremos, but also acknowledging exclusivist, e.g. nativist, racist, misogynist, anti-trans or anti-choice, mobilizations which themselves are ‘body politics’ of sorts? How does your work echo and at the same time perhaps differ from the various traditions of feminist thinking through ‘body politics’? How is your thinking marked by the specific sociopolitical circumstances?
JB: I understand Hannah Arendt to be working implicitly with a performative theory of assembly. In *The Human Condition*, she argues that action not only properly takes place in the public sphere, understood as the polis, but that action also constitutes that sphere. We can say that the sphere is where public actors meet, where their language functions as a kind of action, but we can also say (and perhaps both are true) that only if their language functions as a kind of action does something like a public sphere come to exist at all. She has a similar moment in her work on revolution where she speaks about ‘new beginnings’. People gather, they associate, and they decide in common on how best to govern themselves. That deciding practice becomes performative precisely to the extent that it brings a new social or political reality into existence. This ‘birthing’ power of speaking in concert was important to her and is perhaps one reason she is taken up by deliberative democracy proponents. And though she does clearly mark the body as part of the public sphere, especially in her writing on revolution, many of its ‘needs’—including shelter, sexuality, all matters related to reproduction, infancy, and ageing—are relegated to the *oūκος*, understood as synonymous with the private sphere. Perhaps the use of the classical Greek distinction, as she understood it, was not quite right for modern times. I take it that Habermas was indirectly arguing precisely that in giving a genealogy that shows how the modern distinction displaces the classical ones. Of course, I accept that certain speech acts—especially those that Austin would call ‘illocutionary’—are performative, but I see no reason to dismiss the idea that bodily actions and gestures, especially those undertaken in common or in concert, are not also ‘performative’: they bring into being new social realities. In fact, Arendt’s references to ‘the right to appear’ do not refer only to the right to speak or write or use language. They make implicit reference to a body that has the freedom to appear in public settings, a body that can freely appear in a court of law or a public square or in a public agency or educational institution. The right of habeas corpus—the right to appear before a judge—is but one instance of such a ‘right to appear’.

But how does the ‘right to appear’ operate in relation to ‘acting in concert’? These are two key Arendtian concepts that are not often thought in relation to one another. One answer might be found in an account of new social formations, for any such account would have to explain through what means they were formed. We would have to locate that ‘formative’ power and explain its modality and mechanism. People can stand together in silence and still be signifying in some very powerful ways. Massive numbers can take to the street, effectively displacing the police from the street, as we have seen in the Ni Una Menos demonstrations throughout Latin America, and these are bodily actions seeking to bring about a new political reality—and, to some extent, succeeding. Moreover, in movements like Black Lives Matter, or the newer Palestinian Lives Matter, many who hold the signs are themselves the lives at issue. In such cases, the sign is indexical: this is the life to which the sign refers. They are also at once performative and aspirational: it should be the case that the mattering of all these lives should be the case, should be a founding principle of the way our world should be. And this, what I am doing now, is an indexical instance of that very mattering.

My point is not to say that the body is immediacy. It is not. I was too thoroughly trained in Hegel ever to make such a claim. These are all efforts to situate the body within a historical context in which it has suffered and struggled. And, in this way, sorrow, rage,
and the demand for justice all co-exist in an embodied practice at once self-reflexive and demanding.

**MS & PV**: There is currently much debate on ‘identity politics’. While the concept and the connected political articulations are a crucial element of the (modern) political sphere, e.g. in feminist, queer, anti-racist movements – questioning the seemingly universal subject of the political through the specifics of empirical lives and lived experiences in specific social positioning, e.g. challenging the ‘who’ of the political through the ‘where’ of the social – ‘identity politics’ seems to be willfully misunderstood as a regressive, even anti-political move. Many commentators are convinced that the focus on the ‘who’ of the public and political threatens the focus on arguments, reasoning, issues, i.e. the ‘what’ of the political. In this light, how would you say that ‘identity politics’ and ‘body politics’ resonate with each other? And, would this relate to your earlier work on speech, discourse, and materiality and your writings on the political, as well as subjective dimensions of ethics?

**JB**: Let us remember that the largest and most powerful identity movement in the contemporary political landscape is white supremacy. Even one of the most aggressive anti-migrant groups in Italy calls itself ‘Identity’. My own sense is that LGBTQI+ movements are actually about freedom, equality, and justice. BLM, for instance, is about racial justice and about radical equality. It also makes the claim that black lives should be able to live in freedom, outside of carceral regimes. It seems to me that ‘identity’ is not what characterizes left movements. It is a caricature of the left by those who wish to dismiss the more radical claims for social and economic transformation. Yes, there are some on the left who work within traditional Marxist frameworks, who would claim that class must always be more primary than gender and race. But they are arguably seeking to shore up an older left against the demands of newer social movements. Race and gender do not exactly describe who we are. They are vectors of power, historical formations, sites of political contest. The political claims are for equal wages, the power to live free of the fear of violence and incarceration, free of pathologization. These are basic elements of living in a democracy. Many have not had that chance because of the structural forms of exclusion and effacement that pervade their daily lives.

I don’t think we can do without the question of ‘who’ is the subject of politics. That question has to remain an open question. Because once we have settled it, we have closed the doors to inclusion. I understand that ‘inclusion’ can be a defense against more radical change. But we still have to ask: who counts as the people? It is interesting to me that Habermas called for a public sphere worthy of democracy without reconsidering the important relation between the popular and the populace. What about the question of ‘the people’? Who is included in the ‘demos’? Who was never part of the people, but always part of its lining, or its defining other? We have yet to think through the question of the ‘who’ in politics.

**MS & PV**: On a concrete level: In 2011, you stood amongst the #Occupy crowds in NYC and gave a speech using your mobile phone for notes. How do you read that moment of being with the Occupy group and yet relying on a device that is prominently bound up
with late capitalism? How did bodies, affects, objects, and politics merge in the public sphere? Was that a symptomatic moment and experience?

_JB_: I like this question because it lets me think a bit more about what it is to be ‘bound up’ with a device, as I am as I write these answers to you. Most communicating depends on infrastructures, imported metals, mining, extractivism, corporations, and profit-driven industries. So my speech at that event, a speech written on the subway, was available to me only on the cell phone. If I had arrived with a print version, then the machines that I used would not be present, but they would be presupposed: maybe Dell, or Mac, or Hewlett-Packard (whose investments in the occupation have earned them a place on the boycott list). You would not see that metal, nor would you see the labor put into the manufacturing of the work, the division of labor required, nor the wages that were paid. So, yes, we are surely ‘bound up’ with such companies and technologies at the same time that we seek to use their goods for our own uses. I did not see that as a symptomatic moment, because the political struggle against late capitalism, as well as neoliberalism, is waged by people who are bound up with its various elements, who are subjected by its powers, and whose criticisms emerge from being used by and using, its technologies. So, the example gives us a sense of what struggle has to be, in the middle of Wall Street, to reclaim public space, to make public space available to public housing or for the regeneration of the environment. We stand in the middle of it all, towers mocking us, as we call for a more radical dismantling of its terms. There is no transcendental purity to be had. Or if there is, it is reserved for those who refuse to act.

_MS & PV_: There surely has been a diversification and multiplication of political issues that were forcefully brought into the political arena over the past decades by social movements from the left. In how far does it, in your opinion, make sense to look for connecting frameworks that could enable us to synthesize these struggles?

_JB_: More often than not, these diverse struggles presuppose one another, even though they are not always aware of how that happens. When Paul Gilroy asked, how is race lived as class, or, how is class lived as race, he was showing that they are always lived together even if the conceptualization and the political mobilizations do not always think about how that works. For instance, the anti-gender ideology movement today is clearly supporting and strengthening authoritarian regimes, which means that we not only have to mobilize in favor of gender studies, but in opposition to authoritarianism (and the fascist trends by which they are supported). The feminist movement, Ni Una Menos, went into the unions, encouraging women there to produce their own network so that they could make demands on several different unions at the same time. This was a crucial act of organizing, but it also made clear the way that feminism is a labor issue, that one cannot have labor politics without it. So the links are crucial, and they articulate various ways that movements are already linked, even if they do not have a vocabulary in which to assert that linkage. Similarly, the opposition to militarized police forces links Black Lives Matter with anti-Occupation politics in Palestine (some of the same corporations are operating in Ferguson and the West Bank). And these two are linked with opposition to detention centers that are populating so many borders as migrants are deprived of their
fundamental rights. My sense is that we still are dealing with equality, freedom, and justice as basic terms, as the ideals of radical democracy. And yet, we learn more about what equality must mean when we think about racial equality. It is not simply an instance of equality, but it transforms what we mean, what we imagine, and what we struggle for when we struggle for equality. To link progressive or left movements such as these, we have to set aside all recourse to primary and secondary oppressions and focus more on translation as a political practice. The possibility of a transregional and multilingual solidarity depends on having one’s settled epistemic frame upended by another and then reformulated for the purposes of expanding solidarity. I understand this less as a synthesis of different movements than as an ongoing process of negotiation and connection. Given that ending climate destruction is the precondition of our common life, no matter where we live, no matter whether we are a human creature or another form of life, we could easily find our common bond there in the present moment. The opposition to environmental toxins, pollution, extractivism is already an opposition to capitalism, and it links the indigenous, women, LGBTQI people, and workers, whether or not they are equally aware of the bond. It is also why the transnational and transregional has to be our framework, and why none of us can develop this vision alone or from a single perspective in the world.

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