

EXERCISING FREEDOM

CAN WE EXERCISE FREEDOM LIKE WE EXERCISE OUR BODIES? DO PROTESTERS HAVE TO USE THEIR BODIES TO OCCUPY THE PUBLIC SPACE TO MAKE THEIR DEMANDS ENTER THE POLITICAL SPHERE? SHOULD WE SPEED UP REACHING RADICAL DEMOCRACY, AND SLOW DOWN WITH GENERALIZATIONS? - PROF. JUDITH BUTLER EXPLAINS HOW PRECARIETY AFFECTS PEOPLE'S LIVES, WHAT THE MEANING OF OCCUPY MOVEMENT IS, AND WHY IT „ENCOURAGED THE PUBLIC TO THINK SYSTEMATICALLY ABOUT THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM.“ OF COURSE, ALWAYS REMEMBERING THAT „GENDER REMAINS SURELY WITH US.“

INTERVIEW WITH **JUDITH BUTLER**
BY ELIZA KANIA

Precarization, precarity and precariousness – you use these terms in your publications. Can you highlight the main differences between them?

I am not sure that they are absolutely distinct. But it seems to me that precariousness is a general feature of embodied life, a dimension of our corporeality and sociality. And precarity is a way that precariousness is amplified or made more acute under certain social policies. So precarity is induced. And precarization helps us think about the processes through which precarity is induced – those can be police actions, economic policies, governmental policies, or forms of state racism and militarization.

In your own words, people's lives are nowadays *dispensable* and *substitutable*. What are the causes of this situation?

It is probably important to rephrase this formulation, since what I think is true is that an increasing number of people „have become“ more dispensable and more substitutable, and this is what we mean when we say that precarity is become an ever greater reality in the lives of the vast majority of people. I think that we can certainly say that „neo-liberalism“ is responsible for this increasing precarization of the population, but so, too, are security regimes, and new forms of state racism.

Is it the result of the changes that have occurred in recent years or is it a much longer process?

On the one hand, we have to ask how the development of capitalism has changed, what new features it now has, but also to ask how the operations of capitalism persist, especially the profit motive and class structure. One way that capitalism has changed is that labor is not merely commodified, but it is understood as dispensable. Once there are ways of making profit without labor, labor loses its value, which means that people lose their work. We used to think that labor was necessary to turn a profit, but now there are ways of gaming the market without regard for labor. We have seen the loss of worker's rights, so that the very basis of unions, of social democracy, and democratic socialism has been undermined.

It is also necessary to track how forms of state racism intersect with new forms of capitalism, and how both of these intersect with new security regimes.

Formulating an unambiguous definition of the precariat seems a challenging task. How would you define this group/class/category?

Perhaps this social phenomenon is just now coming into being; a group of people who are not only exploited workers, but those whose labor is now regarded as dispensable. It is one thing to demand a decent wage and good work conditions, and it is quite another to see that there is no job security, and that temporary forms of labor are becoming the norm. So it is that shift in labor conditions that demands that we begin to think the precariat apart from the proletariat. In my view, the precariat are not only those whose labor is considered dispensable, but also those who are targeted by war or who are living in regions that have been decimated by development.

So can we assume that the occupiers are precarians?

No, I think we have to attend to the different forms of public demonstration, since “Occupy” is one form, but it is not the norm. And though the precariat has become an important term in Spain and parts of Europe, I am not sure it translates, for instance, into what is happening in Turkey at this moment. So perhaps we should slow down a bit before we come up with those generalizations.

How would you describe the impact of neoliberal policies on people’s lives?

I very much appreciate how Lauren Berlant has described the lived experience of those living in precarity as a kind of “slow death.” It is not the same as being killed or destroyed by military means, but still the very possibility of subsistence is increasingly called into question. Other values have supervened, like efficiency and rationality, which means that the very rights and powers associated with living as a body, in need of shelter, food, and work, have been increasingly undermined. It is difficult, if not impossible, to live without a sense of future, not knowing where work is coming from, whether it will come at all. It is difficult, if not impossible, to feel that one’s labor is

without value, that it can be used and discarded at will.

At the same time that there is hopelessness, though, there is also rage, and this can be translated into political language and action, and we have seen that in some impressive ways as the precariat has gathered in Spain, in Greece, and in the mobilizations against the G-8.

So, what is the solution? Is it deliberative democracy or would you rather point out another idea?

Certainly, some dimensions of deliberative democracy are important, but I continue to think that “radical democracy” is a goal. It is not only important that people speak to one another and have ways of achieving consensus, but also that they are free to assemble, and that they find ways of actually living with one another, valuing interdependency and equality. I am not sure “deliberative” democracy can help us with these latter goals.

The display of popular and democratic will – that’s how you called the gatherings of protesters during your speech at NYC’s Washington Sq. Park. Are occupiers recapturing solidarity and political ethics or rather creating new political values and demands?

It all depends on the context. For instance, as I write these words, protestors are being dispersed by gas and police force in Taksim Square in Istanbul. Some of the protestors who arrived there are nationalists, and some of them are struggling to defend democracy, which includes the very rights of public assembly they are exercising. Some of them oppose the government’s alliance with efforts to privatize public space, including Taksim, which for many represents the democratic potential of the nation. So some are trying to save the nation, but others oppose both nationalism and neo-liberal forms of privatization. Those alliances can be quite complicated, and my sense is that they probably won’t last. Although police power does have a way of helping people to resist, despite their quite fundamental differences of political opinion.

A few words about the skeptics: some criticize the representatives of the occupy movement for excessive idealism and lack of clearly defined demands. Do the occupiers who are contesting „the system” have to have detailed list of demands, or is it rather a matter of a symbolic act of protest?

I am not sure that I accept the distinction between having demands and performing a symbolic act. Let us think for a moment about the “standing man” in Istanbul as well as the nightly crowds who stand motionless on public space. Motionless, and so non-violent, but also motionless, and so recalcitrant, even obdurate, producing a barrier against both the machines that would destroy the public space and produce private business. but also, importantly, a barrier against the police, making clear on which side force is being wielded. All this can be done without speech, and yet it makes a certain claim. We could say these are merely “symbolic” or we can say that there is a way that the body makes a demand, that bodies in their collectivity make demands, simply by laying claim to a public space, and refusing it privatization and its police control. I think perhaps we have to reconsider the “symbolic” forms in which political demands. In this instance, the body is the vector for that demand.

It also appears that what scares the adversaries of the occupiers and of precariat theorists most is the word “radical.” Can a shift from the apotheosis of the free market, capital and influence of corporations towards more “social” solutions and open democracy be considered revolutionary.

No doubt the word “radical” signifies very differently, depending on the political context. There is no global consensus on its signification. So let’s start with that. Under conditions in which social welfare and public goods are both being radically undermined by new forms of capitalism and new strategies of privatization, then surely insisting on social values and the public good can be part of a more radical agenda. It is interesting that issues such as these could be regarded rather mainstream (including the basic claims of social democracy), but now are considered radical. So perhaps we have to ask about

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those shifts in signification, why and how they matter, and how it might become possible to become part of another shift.

Is the image of protesters in the US mainstream media objective?

As much as the mainstream media discounted the political value of the occupy movement, they also clearly relied on the kinds of analyses that the occupiers offered. That means that the problem of wealth differentials and student debt has become more central to public discourse. Occupy encouraged the public to think systematically about the economic system, and though anti-capitalism will never become that popular in the US, it was made into a public issue, and that is surely something of a breakthrough in this context. What might be most important about the US movement, though, is that its ties to other struggles across the world, since it will be the global alliances that will make the difference.

Relations between the state (mainly police interventions) and occupiers seem to be presented quite equivocally. We can read the reports about brutal police actions, but on the other hand some media present the protesters as violent and destructive. What is the source of violence which increased around the Occupy Movement?

It is important to remember that the Occupy Movement began by calling public attention to increasing differentials of wealth between the rich (a group that only grows smaller and richer) and the poor (a group that only grows larger and poorer). The encampments were part of an effort to reclaim public space, but also to make certain kinds of public claims through exercising the freedom of assembly. Occupation of this kind involved living on the grounds where the right of freedom of assembly is being exercised. And this brought attention to the bodily preconditions of exercising liberal rights such as these. As a result, the groups living in public sometimes included those who were already homeless, exposing what it is to live without shelter, but also living exposed to police forces whose efforts to (a) reclaim public space as a government space and (b) patrol public space in the service of increased privatization.

Although in some few cases some groups allied with occupy were involved in violence against property, that was never, as far as I know, an explicit strategy of occupy itself. The vast majority of violent acts were committed by police acting under state orders and in the service of maintaining a certain relationship between state and market. So though resistance to police violence has become foregrounded (surely in Istanbul, recently, as we have seen), it would be a mistake to think that police violence is the object of contemporary resistance. One has to contextualize police power in relation to what is happening as market values supplant ideas of public good, and as the state seeks to monopolize public space, undermining the very spatial conditions for democracy.

So, what actions of the Occupy Wall Street Movement do you find most important?

What I find most important is the way that space is opened up to the public, which is effectively a way of demanding that such spaces be preserved, of fighting the privatization not only of public space but of public goods. That process of privatization is also what has produced massive inequalities of wealth, but also the situation of unpayable debt. That last is what we might understand as an economic way of killing the future.

While many researchers tend to write about rioted individuals, egos, human beings, suffering itself, etc. you have decided to emphasize corporality, and focus on physicality. What is the meaning of public gatherings of bodies in the case of precarity?

Well, I have always focused on corporeality, even in *Gender Trouble* some 23 years ago, so it is probably no surprise that this dimension of current demonstrations interests me. I think what is most important here is to see how assembled bodies act in tandem with social media and dominant media to produce an “event” that cannot happen without each of these dimensions of action. The condition of precarity induced by neo-liberalism and austerity policies bring into focus the basic needs of the human body for shelter, food, health care, and work, for freedom to move, and freedom of expression, importantly linked with both mobility and speech. So the bodies on the street are

themselves the subject and the aim of politicization, and that does not go away no matter how “virtual” the conflict becomes.

Continuing this topic: can you explain your concept of *politics of public bodies*?

I suppose I am trying to think about what it means that bodies have basic requirements, and that they suffer when those requirements are not met, and that those very bodies, understood as precarious, also act, enter into modes of solidarity, and become a part of a larger resistance struggle. Can we understand what those bodies suffer, actually or potentially, in relation to their assembled action? It seems important to understand the relation between suffering and resistance at the same time that we ask, what difference does it make when bodies act in concert, together. Do they form the kinds of networks of communication and support that they seek to realize in the broader world?

Some of recent polls showed that occupiers have made quite favorable impression on some part of the public. Can they turn this positive reception and voices of support into a real political force? Will the movement continue to resist or it will start to fade and finally disappear? What is your scenario for the occupiers’ future for the next couple of years?

It is surely up to the Occupy Movement to decide its future, so I myself have nothing to say on this matter. I do think that there are different actions that have called attention to the broader aims of the movement, including the engagement of some occupiers in helping those displaced or rendered homeless by Hurricane Sandy in NYC. I think it is clear that the major point about accelerating differentials in wealth has entered into

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public consciousness and even mainstream media, and that many of the huge movements we are seeing right now, including the one in Brazil, are clearly focused on the question of who is getting wealthy at the expense of whom. So as long as that question continues to be posed, and it becomes a rallying point for mobilization, then we can say that Occupy continues to be effective.

What do you mean by *exercising freedom*? Does it mean that we can strengthen and shape our sense of political subjectivity?

When people gather in the street to reclaim the street as public space, they are doing the very thing that they are fighting for. The aim of their politics is enacted at that moment. Similarly, when the undocumented assert rights of citizenship, without having those rights, they are exercising the right – not because they already “have” it, but because they are trying to get it. I understand these kinds of moments as plural performative political action.

Does the precariat have a gender?

As long as literacy and poverty disproportionately affect women, then the precariat will have a gender. As long as transgender and queer people are still at risk on the street, then those exposed to police violence are also exposed to hate crimes – so gender remains surely with us.

Prof. Judith Butler is an American post-structuralist philosopher. Her research fields are feminist philosophy, queer theory, political philosophy, and ethics. She is a Professor in the Rhetoric and Comparative Literature departments at the University of California, Berkeley, and is also the Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School. Butler is considered one of the most influential political and feminist theorists today. Butler is the author of *Gender Trouble*, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* and many other books and publications. She was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno Award in 2012 for her work on “Political theory, on moral philosophy and gender studies.” She is a member of the advisory board of Jewish Voice for Peace and a supporter of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel.

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**R/evolutions: Global Trends &
Regional Issues,**
Volume 1, Issue 1, June 2013.
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