

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

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JUDITH BUTLER

In the last lecture we explored the historical trajectory of feminist theory and politics, before examining some of the basic concepts in Judith Butler's work on sex, gender, and performance.

In this lecture, we will cover some more of Judith Butler's work, particularly on matters of performance, before turning to the set reading – two chapters from 'Understanding Judith Butler' and one chapter from 'Gender Trouble'.



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As we saw in the previous lecture, Butler argues that we continually perform our gender through our actions, bringing about social change through our repeated actions:

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (1990, p. 33)

Our repetition of actions associated with a particular gender congeals that identity around (and within!) us — our actions produce change in our self-definition and in others’ definition of us.



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There are many examples of the regulatory framework surrounding our performance of our gender, just as, in Foucault's work, we saw a number of disciplining mechanisms by which our society is ordered.

Let's unpick one of these in greater detail, as an example:

"The fact is many men are simply repulsed by excessive hair on women. And it's obvious why — hairiness is a masculine trait and most blokes like their women to be feminine."

The Metro 26/10/05

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It is true that men are, on average, naturally hairier than women on many parts of their body (e.g. chin, chest, legs)

However, *all* women naturally have quite a lot of underarm hair, and some hair on their legs.

And culturally we expect women to have more hair on their heads than men.



DISCUSSION

1 – Is it naturally true that “hairiness is a masculine trait”?

2 – Why do we, as individuals, and us, as society, put so much effort and money into upholding it as truth?

3 – What is it about contradicting this truth that causes problematic issues?

4 – How else to we externally perform our gender? Our sexuality?



PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY



PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

It is important here to not overstate what Butler is actually arguing. Sometimes, we take Butler's position to be that gender is simply performance and nothing more.

This would mean that I could suddenly just decide to perform my gender differently and the performance would result in change.

What Butler is actually saying is that gender is a matter of **performativity**, and is made up of both conscious and unconscious performances, some of which we choose and some of which we don't.



PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

The performativity of our gender is made up of conscious choices, unconscious performances, and the reception of these performances by others – it is more complicated and difficult than merely changing our outward performance, we must also seek to interrogate our internal performances, and we are dependant on the recognition of those performances by others.

For Butler, we cannot exist outside the terms of gender that exist within our societies, nor can our individual performances easily dissuade or change these established gender norms.

“gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed”

(Gender Trouble: p. 25)

PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

A critical aspect of this is that the subject (you) are not stable – it is fluid and flexible to an extent.

However, while we are able to construct and perform our own identities through choosing actions every day (e.g. choosing to dress in a masculine way), the social world in which we live exerts a great deal of control over our performances and the reception of them.

There are a number of examples available of this process, whereby our free performance is constrained by outside factors, beyond our control.

PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

These examples include performances like:

1 - The social world in which we live defines heterosexuality as “normal”, and treats those who do not perform heterosexuality with exclusion or violence.

2 - The social world sees sex as a binary opposition – you are either male or female – and has treated those who fail to perform as sufficiently one or the other with exclusion or violence.

3 – We often define ourselves in relation to the opposite pole of the binary – by being masculine, we are being non-feminine – and has treated those who maintain performance associated with the oppose with exclusion or violence.

SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE



SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE

Butler's work could be seen as leaving us where we began (after Foucault) — trapped in a structured society that controls and disciplines our individual desires according to social categories of naturalness.

But this isn't the end of Butler's work — rather she highlights the role that subversion and resistance to gender norms can play in loosening up the strictures of social expectation, and the way in which social construction calls into being its opposite.

SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE

An example of the second point is the conception of 'homosexuality' as a form of identity. Butler argues that as heterosexuality was defined and performed by powerful sections of society and become understood as the dominant form of sexual orientation, it called into being the opposite to itself, the homosexual identity.

It did so through the process of binarization – as heterosexuality became associated with monogamy, homosexuality became associated with promiscuity, as heterosexuality became associated with healthy respectability, homosexuality became associated with deleterious hedonism.



SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE

There are other ways of challenging the way in which society seeks to control our performances.

For example, by deliberately acting outside of expected gender norms, we can call into question the 'naturalness' of our socially assigned gendered expectations.

Or by parodying aspects of gender expectations, such as in some representations of hyper-masculinity or hyper-femininity, we can highlight the disjunction between our real bodily forms and the expected gender norms associated with it.

SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE

The first of these forms of resistance is termed 'genderfucking' – the deliberate fucking about with expected gender norms.

The second form can be seen in parodic performances of gendered expectations, such as forms of drag, which seek to subvert the notion of femininity through parodic representation.



SUBVERSION AND RESISTANCE

For Butler, our gender and our sex are intricately linked, but not necessarily so. She writes:

“If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity”

(Gender Trouble: 136)

We perform our identities, but so too are our identities performed onto us.



READING



READINGS

Your set readings for the preceding two sessions have been two chapters of the book 'Understanding Judith Butler' and a single chapter of 'Gender Trouble' by Judith Butler.

The nature of this module is theory heavy and as such we will spend a significant amount of time in this session going through the set readings – please make sure you complete them after each session.

SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND DESIRE

1 – What is the relationship / point of departure of Butler's work from Feminist Theory? Which wave would you put Butler in, if any?

2 – How does Butler's work identifying "terms" relate to Foucault's work on "epistemes"?

3 – What is the relationship between subject and identity here? Is one a priori?

'The question of "the subject" ', Butler writes in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, 'is crucial for politics' (1990: 2). The explicit departure point for Butler's interrogation of the relation between subjectivity and identity is the discussion, in that text, of the extent to which there is a universal basis for feminist politics. Specifically, the issue she addresses is whether or not the presumption of a series of identities or categories (women, feminism, masculinity, patriarchy, the West), consistent and continuous across historical periods and various cultural sites and contexts, can be justified. Her point is that any feminist political project cannot simply presume or take for granted the terms through which it acts, since such terms (and the meanings associated with them) are the product of the discursive regime and field of power that feminism wishes to challenge. Moreover, there is no point in simply appealing to or working through institutions of authority such as the law, if the field of law is one of the key sites for producing and naturalising the conditions of gender hegemony and violence. In other words, for Butler the politics of identity is always derived from, dependent on, and only explicable in terms of, a prior politics of subjectivity.

SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND DESIRE

- 1 – What is this example doing?
- 2 – How does this example relate to sex characteristics?
- 3 – How might we choose to categorise bodily characteristics differently?
- 4 – How might we choose to understand sex characteristics differently?

Something seemingly as obvious, unmediated and commonsensical as the parts of the body – the stomach, arms, feet, neck, genitals, etc. – are only visible and distinctive in terms of their relation to, and differentiation from, other parts of the overall structure. So for instance in everyday popular (rather than physiological) understanding, the stomach begins somewhere below the chest and ends above the groin and the genitals, and reaches its limits on either side at the hips (below) and the ribs (above); while there is that disconcertingly anonymous area in between that attracts the designation in the absence of a designation, called 'the side'. At the level of the physiological sciences, while the categories, points of differentiation and specific characteristics that correspond with or constitute the parts of the body are more definite, the charts that neatly plot and represent the parameters and locations of organs, muscles, ligaments, blood vessels and bones disguise the reality that spaces are blurred or shared, categories overlap, and imbrication, rather than separation, is the reality.

SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND DESIRE

1 – What is meant here by the subject being reliant on the practices and discourses of power?

2 – How does power form the subject?

3 – Is the notion of individuality of desire a form of subjection?

Butler (1997b) refers to the situation where the subject is not only constituted through and dominated by, but also remains necessarily tied to and reliant on, the practices and discourses of power, as a form of 'subjection'. The point of this term is that it picks up on both sets of the aforementioned operations, and refuses the idea that the subject and any form of agency are not to some extent mediated by or negotiated through power and its various techniques (discourses, norms, forms of surveillance). Butler points out that power is thought of as something that is 'done to us', and which we seek to escape from or avoid:

But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are ... Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency. (1997b: 2)

SUBJECTIVITY, IDENTITY, AND DESIRE

1 – Why might Butler hold that sexual identity is the central form of identity?

2 – Do we choose our sex? How are we given it?

3 – What does Butler mean at the beginning of her quotation?

4 – What does it mean that “these losses not be avowed, and not be grieved”?

For Butler the central form of identity is sexual identity: in order to preserve this identity, identification must be in accordance with the incest prohibition and the dictates of heteronormativity (this issue will be dealt with in detail in the following chapter). Identification, then, is not so much a kind of agency as a choice where there is no choice; the subject is designated by or called names (girl, child, daughter), and forms of attachment, and eventually, desire, must be recognisably and commensurably normal. Identification is also, crucially, about non-identification, both at the level of the incest prohibition and by extension, the prescribed narratives of sexuality. As Butler writes:

It seems clear that the positions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ ... are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that these losses not be avowed, and not be grieved ... The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been accomplished, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire. (1997b: 135)

GENDER

1 – How might a stable, knowable, and universal subject regulate aspects of that identity?

2 – What is Butler's strategy then, for challenging forms of gender / sex inequality?

3 – Does this put her in opposition to feminist activism?

Butler's critique centres on the mechanisms by which 'women' in feminist representational politics comes to assume the status of a stable, knowable and universal subject, an assumption that Butler contends is 'an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations' (p. 5). What Butler means by this is that the category 'women' appears as though it has always been there as self-evident, when it is in fact a consequence of a productive field of power. Since that field of power produces inequities of gender, feminism's uncritical replication of women thus ensures that the mechanisms of power that produce gender oppression remain unscrutinised. Butler argues that rather than a strategy of representational politics, feminism would be better served by an enquiry into, and critique of, the terms by which the category of women comes to have any currency as a meaningful cultural category.

GENDER

1 – What was the ‘centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy’?

2 – When does this occur? How does it connect with broader social trends?

3 – What is the connection between the identitisation of homosexuality, and its inability to speak in society?

4 – What was the purpose of homosexuality in this frame?

For example, in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* (2008), Foucault examines how heterosexuality came to be understood as a form of sexuality distinct from homosexuality, while simultaneously being constituted as the universal norm from which ‘the homosexual’ deviates. Foucault asserts that prior to the end of the eighteenth century sodomy was regarded primarily in a juridical frame as ‘against the law’, differing only in terms of degrees of ‘naturalness’ (pp. 38–40) from other sins such as extramarital relations or adultery. However, following a ‘centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy’ (pp. 38–9) in which heterosexuality was enacted under a new discourse of privacy, and an increasingly public focus on the people who participated in the non-normative aspects of sexuality, sexual deviancy became both compelled to speak, and intimately attached to the bodies that spoke it. Foucault cites numerous examples of this ‘incitement to discourse’ around acts of perversity, from the church confessional to the psychiatrist’s couch. As this discourse of perversity developed, a new ‘specification of individuals’ (p. 43) became intimately linked with the perversions in which those individuals engaged, and the notion of an identifiable homosexual emerged. Whereas homosexuality was now constituted as an identity, heterosexuality was simultaneously required to speak of itself ‘less and less’ (p. 38). Heterosexuality thus appears as being ‘without history’, when that very appearance is dependent upon subjectivating discursive practices emerging within a field of power. Butler

GENDER

- 1 – What are the ramifications of illegibility in our gendered performances?
- 2 – What is the difference, for Butler, between our physical bodies and our social bodies?
- 3 – Is one in any sense freer / more true?
- 4 – What is the connection of the last example with Speech Act Theory?

Butler's insistence, in the work that follows *Gender Trouble*, on the ramifications of illegibility, was partly a response to a persistent feminist critique that in asserting that the sexed body is produced through discourse, she ignores the materiality of the body. Within such arguments, Butler asserts, matter is taken to be the indisputable biology of difference, the bodies that 'live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence' (1993: xi). It is these bodies that critics contend 'cannot be dismissed as mere construction' (p. xi). Rather than disputing this irrefutability, Butler instead draws attention to how the notion of construction in such critiques is understood. She argues that to define the body as a construction, as she does, is not to render it either artificial or false; rather it is to hold that bodies only make sense, only come to be understood, through a variety of descriptive regimes. In one sense, bodies only appear through the language we have to describe them. It is through the way bodies are described or spoken that they become intelligible, and it is in this description that bodies are constructed. Butler uses the moment of birth as an example of this. She argues that when a baby is born, the attribution of a gender pronoun transforms that baby from the inhuman 'it' (as in 'What is it?') to the she or he ('It's a girl!') that renders the infant intelligible (p. 7). In this interpellative moment, the phrase 'It's a girl' only makes sense because there is an understanding of 'girl' that precedes it, and that requires its ongoing adherence.

GENDER

1 – What performances most constitute our gender?

2 – How do our internal performances (to our selves) result in external performances?

3 – How might some of our performances of gender be physical while some are non-physical? Give examples.

For Butler, gender performativity operates through precisely the same logic of repetition and citation, and it is on these two functions that the efficacy of any performance of gender depends. She argues that certain announcements of gender, and certain performances of gender, produce the status and fixity of gender through the forced reiteration of norms. Discourses enact their own performatives by appearing to name that which they in fact produce through a reiteration of the constraints set up in the terms of that discourse. The truth of discourses of gender relies on markers of truth that are in fact produced by those discourses. That truth is enacted through the means by which:

acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body ... Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (1990: 136, emphasis in original)

GENDER TROUBLE

1 – What does De Beauvoir mean here?

2 – What does Kristeva mean here?

3 - What does Irigaray mean here?

4 – Can the same things be said of man / men?

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.

—Simone de Beauvoir

Strictly speaking, “women” cannot be said to exist.

—Julia Kristeva

Woman does not have a sex.

—Luce Irigaray

The deployment of sexuality . . . established this notion of sex.

—Michel Foucault

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual.

—Monique Wittig

GENDER TROUBLE

- 1 – What is the root of this process of totalization identified here?
- 2 – Where else do we see this process of totalization occurring, beyond gender?
- 3 – How can we resist the desire towards totalization?

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. It can operate to effect other relations of racial, class, and heterosexist subordination, to name but a few. And clearly, listing the varieties

GENDER TROUBLE

1 – What does it mean for a gender to be intelligible?

2 – What is meant by ‘coherence and continuity’ in the context of sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire?

3 – Where do we see social encouragement towards the intelligibility of our gender / sex / practice / desire performances?

“Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice.

GENDER TROUBLE

1 – What would be an example of the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames?

2 – How is real heterosexuality a parody of the ideal heterosexuality?

3 – What function does an ideal, but unreachable, form play in the context of power?

4 – What might be an example of the answer to Butler's last question?

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original,” discussed in the final sections of [chapter 3](#) of this text, reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original.⁵⁶ Even if heterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse from which to do gender at all, the question remains: What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?

ROUND UP

Sex and gender are constructed categories of meaning which are produced through the performance of individuals and of society.

In performing our gender, we reinscribe certain characteristics as 'natural' and related to our physical sex, and certain characteristics as 'unnatural'.

This performance is not just an act of free will, but also represent social conditioning of our selves, and social expectations of our performance.

Our gendered identities rely on the formation of binary opposition, where our identity is formed through the rejection of that which is constructed as the other.

Gender congeals through the repetition of gendered performances and through the ordered intelligibility of our gender performances with our sex, desire, and practice.

READING

Today, we have completed our discussion of Judith Butler and her work. We turn in the next sections to aspects of queer theory.

Your reading for this session are 'Thinking Sex' by Gayle Rubin and 'Hegemonic Masculinity' by RW Connell – which you may already be familiar with.

PDFs of these articles are included on the Moodle page.

