

## **Judith Butler: *Undoing Gender*. Routledge: New York. 2004**

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1 *Undoing Gender* assembles eleven of Butler's most recent contributions to debates on gender and sexuality, in her own words, "on the question of what it might mean to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life" (1). The title henceforth already marks Butler's slight shift in perspective. If her landmark study *Gender Trouble* (1990) for the most part investigates how gender is performatively reiterated, *Undoing Gender* focuses on how gender rather is continuously undone. The issues she takes up to illustrate possible disruptions of binary gender concepts concern the socio political implications of transgender identity and transsexuality, gay marriage, questions arising from new arrays of kinship, as well as feminist/queer psychoanalysis and their status within philosophical frameworks. In most of these essays she expounds the problems of the continuous and often ambivalent negotiation between individual autonomy and governing social norms. As she expounds, her reflections are always "guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibilities of unbearable life, or, indeed, social or literal death" (8). What Butler highlights in *Undoing Gender* is how "human rights" often entail the risk of exclusion, or worse, of degrading those who fail to comply.

2 The title of the introductory chapter is "Acting in Concert" and designates both a plea for collective political activism and an attempt at bringing together the main concerns of the following articles that circle around four current debates: 1) the effects of recent transgender/transsexual politics on gender conceptions, 2) the conflicting consequences of the legalisation of gay marriage in many Western countries, 3) new psychoanalytic approaches to sexuality and gender addressing the alleged inevitability of the heteronormative structuring of the symbolic, and 4) the relation of current developments within gender politics to academia. What binds these issues for Butler is their relation to our notion of who counts as "human." As she states, "the human is not captured once and for all. That the category is crafted in time, and that it works through excluding a wide range of minorities means that its rearticulation will begin precisely at the point where the excluded speak to and from such a category" (13). This is precisely the enterprise she undertakes throughout the book.

3 In the second chapter, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy," Butler explains her notion of inclusive transformation, a recurring concept in the book, by which she understands a continuous critical disruption of "what has become settled knowledge and

knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim [so that] something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place" (27). Butler here emphatically argues for an ethics of integration, where the claims to individual autonomy and social recognition do not finalise but perpetuate a productive and shifting dialogue between ego and other. She states that such an integral process is possible when one embraces "the value of being beside oneself, given over to others, finding oneself in a trajectory of desire in which one is taken out of oneself, resituated irreversibly in a field of others in which one is not the presumptive center" (25). Being aware of this constitution of human sociality becomes a prerequisite for a careful rethinking of its often limiting capacity.

4 In the following chapter "Gender Regulations" Butler opposes any clear cut distinction between a cultural and a psychological analysis of gender and sexuality, pointing out how the Lacanian symbolic rather might be seen as "the sedimentation of social practices" (44) perpetuating cultural heteronormativity through its insistence on an oedipalised family structure. "In other words, the authoritative force that shores up the incontestability of the symbolic law is itself an exercise of that symbolic law, a further instance of the place of the father, as it were, indisputable and incontestable" (46). Leaving alternative forms of kinship aside as far as possible from its theorisations, psychoanalysis contributes to the (re)production of laws that it purports to describe. While embracing some of the tools that psychoanalysis offers for a thorough social critique, such as the triangulation of desire, Butler argues for a "queer poststructuralism of the psyche" (44) and of gender which includes a conceptual separation of gender from sexuality (where one does not follow from the other) as well as an undermining of gender's alleged heteronormative binariness through its decontextualisation in queer sexualities.

5 The following two papers, "Doing Justice to Someone" and "Undiagnosing Gender" both address the issue of trans politics. Offering two examples which testify to the pathologising and heteronormalising treatment of transpeople in medical as well as juridical discourses Butler convincingly highlights and accentuates the conflicting impulses which emerge from different conceptualisations of transgendered concerns. Rather than complicating and disrupting notions of binary genders, their life stories and demands are often employed as "proof" for an inborn and coherent gender identity. One problem Butler outlines is that in order to receive funding for sex-change operations, one literally subscribes to a view of "transgendered identity" as a psychopathological disease which can be cured by an operation "adjusting" the body to the "given" gender of a person. Individual autonomy thus

requires a subscription to one's own abnormalcy opposed to an otherwise alleged coherence between body and gender.

6 In "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual" Butler takes the legislation of gay marriage as a starting point for reflections concerning the consequences the granting of legal rights to married couples has for those who live in alternative familial arrangements. The dilemma between achieving social recognition and legal equality of homosexual couples on the one hand without rendering other sexual constellations illegible on the other is Butler's main concern here. While her arguments accentuate this problem in profound ways and some of her points cannot be dismissed, the debates concerning gay marriage, in my opinion, sometimes centre too much on the alleged impositional character this development is said to confer upon individuals. In Butler's opinion "the sexual field is circumscribed in such a way that sexuality is already thought of in terms of marriage" (106). I wonder whether institutionalised marriage really holds this power over individual conceptions of sexuality. Does gay marriage really foreclose new possibilities for thinking about more imaginable kinship and familial arrangements or might it not be that it rather opens up further conceptualisations of intimate configurations? Surely, to argue in favour of a more inclusive, non-favouring politics is important but different from arguing against a new legislative option for non-heterosexual arrangements.

7 In the following chapters Butler further elaborates on questions that she already addressed in her landmark study *Gender Trouble*. She engages in the critical dialogue that has originated from that publication in a sometimes surprisingly personal manner, which appear to be part of a new biographically founded rhetorics, adapted in answer to the constant attacks on her for being an a-political philosopher. Thus, besides of a theoretical update of Butler's main point of critical investigation, namely heteronormativity and its constituting effects on human sociality along with the way it seeks to naturalise its own doings, we can discern a more biographically founded argumentation here. While shifting in their focus or imagined addressee, distinguishing the chapters' theses from each other is not always easy, not only because the foregrounded discourses gain through their critical alliance and are difficult to sever in any event, but also because the essays were written for different occasions and therefore some key concerns are repeated throughout.

8 Taking recourse to the "new issues" approached in the first half of the book as well as responding to criticism of her own work, "Longing for Recognition," "Quandaries of the Incest Taboo," "The End of Sexual Difference," "Bodily Confessions," and "The Question of Social Transformation" tackle the discursive intersections and interstices of psychoanalysis

and philosophy, performativity, representation, and illegibility, body and language, feminism, sexuality and gender. Addressing her critics directly, she states what to her appears to be the central question of gender, feminist and queer studies:

Sexual difference, [...] as a question that prompts feminist inquiry, [...] is something that cannot be quite stated, that troubles the grammar of the statement, and that remains, more or less permanently, to interrogate [...]. If one calls such terms into question, does that mean they cannot be used anymore? [...] [I]t means only that the term is not simply a stumbling block on which we rely, an uninterrogated premise for political argument. (178-179)

Butler's main interest remains the unsettling of heteronormative gender and sexuality conceptions. But contrary to what many critics of her work believe her approach to the subject does not lead to an a-political voluntarism, but rather her deconstructive impetus takes into account the discursive context, in which feminist inquiry is situated and in which these terms need to be interrogated accordingly.

9 The closing article of *Undoing Gender*, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak" is the one least overtly concerned with gender in the collection. It is a personal reflection upon the changing contour of critical philosophical interrogation, which, in Butler's opinion, increasingly takes place outside of the departments of philosophy. Since she as much as her work have often been denied a place within philosophical academia proper, a fate that she shares with other big names of feminist inquiry, she embraces the growing amount of linkages within the humanities that bring about "so many more unexpected conversations across disciplines, such extraordinary movements of thought that surpass the barriers of departmentalization, posing a vital question for those who remain behind" (250). Here again, Butler seems to speak from the position of the excluded, which ironically gives her the possibility of leaving structural confinements behind, making room for a critical distance and forward moving attitude at the same time.

10 The assembled essays in *Undoing Gender* clarify once more why Butler maintains a heavyweight albeit controversial position within (feminist) philosophy. She appears to be collaborative with and politically dedicated to many areas of human rights. Her resistance to settle anywhere for good, her proposition of a constant rethinking of one's own position continue to make it difficult to usurp her. Considering her philosophical and political framework though, this is obviously only consistent. Minor flaws I find with *Undoing Gender* are repetitive arguments, probably due to its being a collection rather than a singular book, and its sometimes incongruously interwoven autobiographical stories. While Butler's personal circumstances are certainly interesting and often moving and do not diminish the clarity and seriousness of her arguments, in this context they create mythologies, which she in other

places aims to disrupt. But, to rephrase one chapter of the book, "doing justice to Butler" in a review is hardly possible and *Undoing Gender*, as a consequential and even more accessible continuation of concerns already put forward in earlier works such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, is a highly recommended publication.