Judith Butler in Belgium: Reflections on Public Grief and Precarity in the Wake of the Paris Attacks

Holly Brown

Abstract

Judith Butler's presence in Europe during the Paris attacks provides an opportunity to reflect on the contours of her rich, philosophical legacy. Butler's most recent work can be characterised by way of a shift towards more explicit global and biopolitical concerns, as exemplified in her post 9/11 texts *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009). This paper will explore specific aspects of public discourse in the wake of the Paris massacre through Butler's concept of grievability. Butler contends that the ability to be mourned within the West illustrates which lives are valued or disposable in our contemporary geopolitical context. Examining the way in which certain social media platforms facilitated and circumscribed displays of public grief enables us to contend with the complex relationship between recognition, vulnerability, and the violence of defining "the human".

Keywords: Judith Butler, precarity, biopolitics, grievability, gender

✧ ✧ ✧

On the 16th of November 2015 Judith Butler received an honorary doctorate at the University of Liège. Butler, eminent gender theorist and philosopher, was honoured alongside the critical theorist Nancy Fraser and the author Caryl Phillips, bonded intellectually by a common concern about the relationship between representation and recognition within contemporary multicultural societies. While in the opening remarks Butler's diverse oeuvre was celebrated for its sustained examination of subjects that are peripheral to routes of traditional philosophical and political considerations, it is still through the now classic 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

Subversion of Identity that most individuals gain their first encounter with Butler's philosophical approach. In *Gender Trouble* Butler developed the notion that gender is performative; not the externalization of an inner core but rather a practice to be sustained through repetition. In presenting gender as a socially constructed variable that adapts to different historical and cultural contexts, Butler challenged both patriarchal perspectives and feminist political stances that were rooted in stable conceptions of identity. Corresponding perhaps to the continuing resonance of Butler's earlier works about gender, her talk at Liège "Evaluer l'esprit critique" (2015a) was formed around the dissection of diverse groups that reject binary notions of gender.

The tone of the evening was drastically modified by current events, though Butler did not address them within "Evaluer l'esprit critique" directly. The seven coordinated terrorist attacks that killed over 130 people had occurred in Paris only a few days earlier, marking another tragic episode in a turbulent year for the French people following the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in January and a series of other smaller-scale terrorist incidents (Chrisafis, 2016). Before Butler received her honorary doctorate, the university rector asked us to perform a standardised act of public mourning; to stand, to bow our heads, to offer a moment's silence to those who died in Paris. Butler took this opportunity to make allusions to the wider scale of global terrorism. Massacres in Beirut, Palestine, Ankara were mentioned within the ceremony by Butler herself, but also in her punctual and personal response to the killings which was published on the *Verso* website on November 14th (2015b). In that reflection, "Mourning Becomes the Law", she reflects upon her own experience of being in Paris at the time of the attacks and probes the restriction of grief to the national frame, asking why "the café as target pulls at my heart in ways that other targets cannot" (2015b). While not bound to Paris through nation, Liège enjoys a greater linguistic, geographical, and cultural proximity to the French capital, perhaps, than any of the locations more directly afflicted by the horrors of terrorist violence.[1] The act of public mourning at Liège underlines a tense realization which Butler's meditations stress. Had the other attacks not had the peculiar privilege of temporally coinciding with those in Europe, then those that had died outside of the imagined boundaries of the West would not have been recognised in this public institution in the same manner. Considering this scene at Liège in relation to some of the specific framing of the wider discourse, particularly on social media, around the Paris attacks provides a means through which to examine the contours of Butler's thought from her earliest preoccupations with the consequences of performativity to her more direct engagement with the way in which marginal populations are produced (Watson, 2012, p. 1). Viewing the performance of public grief through a selection of Butler's most recent work allows us to examine the contention that the act of lowering our heads for one group of people but not

others outlines a wider illustration of whose lives are valued or disposable in our current geopolitical context.

Butler's Political Turn: Liveable Lives, Grievable Deaths

From her earlier work on sexual minorities to her more current engagement with refugees, the stateless, and the Black Lives Matter movement, Butler has consistently engaged with bodies that have been marginalised in some way by the current operations of Western democracy. Thus despite a thematic shift from a focus on gender and sexuality in her initial texts such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) to her contemporary, yet by no means exclusive, focus on Foucauldian questions of life and death (Watson, 2012, p. 2), Butler's philosophical approach can be unified through its continuing investigation into how the hierarchical distinctions between embodied subjects are maintained and produced within the contemporary public sphere. In acknowledging the power that comes with defining "the human", Butler's oeuvre can be placed alongside biopolitical thinkers such as Achille Mbembe and Giorgio Agamben who focus on the continuing violence of the exclusion of certain historically marked groups from civic and political structures (Campbell & Sitze, 2012, p. 19). Sarah Salih thus characterises one of the driving impulses within Butler's work as the "ethical impetus to extend the norms by which 'humans' are permitted to conduct livable lives in socially recognised spheres" (2004, p. 4).

Intriguingly, Butler's lecture at Liège illuminated two of the specific directions that have characterised this biopolitical turn. In her recently published *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*, Birgit Schippers argues that 9/11 provoked a shift in Butler's writing towards a broader engagement with global issues (2014, p. 3). The affective penetration of the terrorist attacks within Paris into the Liège ceremony can thus be seen to echo the adjustment of Butler's perspective in the wake of the Bush administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to engage with more overt politically international subject matter. This transition is best exemplified by Butler's publications *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009). In her analysis of the verbal and visual rhetoric of the War on Terror, Butler uses her philosophically ambitious approach to call for a more careful analysis of the many interweaving, conflicting strands that constitute our current geopolitical situation (Schippers, 2014, p. 5). Taken together, these texts form the basis for what Janell Watson describes as Butler's own "theory of precarity" (2012, p. 1).

We can perceive the central tenets of this conceptual framework germinating in *Precarious Life*, a series of essays that analyses political discourse in the aftermath of

September 11th. Within this collection, Butler examines the missed opportunity to use the exposure of America's fragility productively, to utilise a temporary dislocation from First World privilege to acknowledge a mutual corporeal vulnerability as a basis for a new interdependent global political community (2004, p. xiii). In *Frames of War*, Butler nuances this perspective by drawing a distinction between "precariousness", a general condition shared by all forms of life due to our physical liability, and "precarity", a politically induced condition which refers to specific populations exposed to state violence or neglect (2009, pp. 25-26). *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* aim to construct a discourse that at once is able to emphasise our mutual dependency while acknowledging the way in which intersectional racialised and gendered geopolitical forces make some lives more vulnerable than others (Schippers, 2014, p. 3).

While these two texts taken together are certainly wide-ranging in their approach, reflecting upon the role of state-sponsored violence in a range of contexts including Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and Israel, they are undergirded by a central theme that was, again, gestured to in the act of public mourning performed at Liège. The concern over how the affective process of mourning and grief are used as regulatory norms to determine which lives matter is a continuing occupation of Butler's work.[2] Within her post 9/11 texts, Butler illuminates how a differential distribution of public grieving defines the limits of the human. Starting from a localised, universal experience, Butler asks us to consider how in the celebration of the birth of a child there is the implication that if the infant were to die it would be grieved, and that this "future anterior is installed as the condition of its life" (2009, p. 15). Grievability, the ability to be mourned, is therefore a presupposition for a life that matters (Butler, 2009, p. 14). Expanding the frame, Butler then asks us to consider the unmournability of specific lives, particularly Arab peoples', and those who do not inhabit the Western world (2004, p. 32). The lack of obituaries for the war casualties published by the West from the War on Terror demonstrates how public grief is a crucial resource for politics and ethics, for determining a ranking between lives that are valued and those that are not (Lloyd, 2008, p. 94). The differential allocation of grief produced by our cultural frames allows us to think about who counts as a human, exposing a normative violence in who can be mourned and grieved (Butler, 2004, p. 37). Butler thus divides the global, biopolitical line between valued and disposable populations not only through who can and cannot be grieved, but additionally whose lives are considered so sacred that a perceived threat to them can be enough to mobilise war (2004, p. 32). Reading the actions of European governments to conduct airstrikes on Syria in the wake of Paris from a Butlerian perspective, we can perceive how modern warfare is dependent on the aim of maximizing precariousness for specific,

ungrievable groups while (allegedly) minimizing precariousness for others (2009, p. 22).

Sovereignty, the Subject, and Social Media

The aftermath of the Paris massacre, in which outpourings of grief for those killed dominated Western media discourse, provides an opening to discuss the intricacies of Butler's theory of precarity. Within *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*, Butler places great importance on the intimate connection between the way in which the media framed the War on Terror, and the subsequent conduct of those wars. She contends that the regulation of the visual field, the reliance on embedded reporting by journalists in the Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts, works to undermine "a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel, disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the face of one expression of violence and righteous coldness in the face of another" (2009, p. 52). Butler's commentary on the media response to the War on Terror focuses exclusively on traditional photojournalistic and televisual methods. The importance of social media in the way in which the Paris attacks were reported to the public, and indeed subsequently how individuals responded to them allows us to explore Butler's connection between framing and grievability from a new, dynamic perspective. Particularly stimulating for this conversation is the controversy surrounding the selection of new or adapted features that the social media giant Facebook added to their interface following the attacks. One allowed the site's users to place a transparent red, white, and blue French flag over their profile picture. The site also activated the "Safety Check" function for the Paris locality (Barnard, 2015). Examining the response to these Facebook features within the wider discourse around the Paris attacks enables us to reflect on the way in which previously existing social structures of perception circumscribed and shaped these public displays of grief.

The dynamics of what Butler terms the "differential framing of violence" (2009, p. 1) that underpins our affective and ethical dispositions played itself out in remarkable ways with regards to the addition of the "Safety Check" function. A feature normally reserved for natural disasters, "Safety Check" automatically alerts those you are connected to within the site that you are safe once you have logged into Facebook. While Facebook was applauded by mainstream media outlets for providing an accessible and easy means for individuals to check up on their loved ones, other commentators questioned why the "Safety Check" function had not been activated for suicide attacks in Beirut which killed at least 43 people and wounded over 200 the day before Paris (Barnard, 2015). Annia Ciezadlo, a Beirut-based journalist, commented "when something bad happens in Lebanon, the world takes an unspoken attitude that it's no

big deal—that people here are 'far more used to violence than Paris'" (2015).[3] Butler's contention that "the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated" (2009, p. 1) resonates with Ciezadlo's assessment of the global disparity of the means of registering violence. In terms of standard reporting, the attacks in Beirut were covered by major news outlets. But in not installing the "Safety Check" feature for those that live in Lebanon, we can perceive the operation of a normative frame that "regulate[s] and determine[s] who counts" (Lloyd, 2008, p. 104). As Ciezadlo asserts, the violence experienced by those living in Lebanon is naturalized; the safety of the people living there is positioned as unimportant, outside of our frame of reference. Ciezadlo draws on the media response to the refugee crisis that had dominated the news in previous months. In particular, she highlights the case of Alan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian whose drowning on the crossing to Europe was widely discussed and publicly grieved, vying that had the death occurred in Lebanon then there would have been "no global outpouring of support, no donations from all over the world" (2015). The precariousness, the overwhelming fragility of Alan's existence arguably made his death impossible for the Western media to ignore. But it was the framing of the event, the context of Alan's family attempting to transition from a geographical place of politically induced precarity to the safety of Europe, which can be seen to provoke our sorrow. In contrast to Alan, the deaths of the children in Lebanon vanish in what Butler describes as "the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds" (2004, p. 35). The lack of the "Safety Check" feature for those locations positioned outside of the West can therefore be seen to demonstrate the violence of omission.

In conjunction with the "Safety Check" function, Facebook also implored its users to cover their own image with the French tricolour: "Change your profile picture to support France and the people of Paris" (Chittal, 2015). And thousands, though Facebook will not disclose the full amount to the press, did. This was the first time that the site had used the coloured filter for an act of mourning (Sanders, 2015), its only widely available previous incarnation had been the overlay of a rainbow flag offered in June after the U.S. Supreme Court legalised gay marriage. The disparity in which nations Facebook users were permitted to pledge allegiance or support to were called out, and individuals took to Twitter to ask why there were no filters for Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Pakistan (Mills, 2015).

While this is undoubtedly an important concern, the notion of draping any national flag over a symbol of one's identity bears careful reflection about the way in which sovereignty, representability, and national discourse operated in the wake of the Paris attacks. Let us first explore the concept of nation and nationalism within this context. In her examinations of the U.S.'s War on Terror, Butler positions heightened forms of nationalist discourse as antithetical to a politics based on vulner-

ability (2004, p. xiv). Nationalism creates a kind of transcendence over corporeal destructibility, permitting violent retribution on those who threaten its identity (Butler, 2009, p. 47). The opportunity to apply the national flag to an image of one's self can, therefore, be perceived as a means of emphasising immunity and wholeness, the drawing of divisions between different communities at a time of increased global corporeal vulnerability (Wilcox, 2015, p. 172). Thus even though individuals were astute in calling out the privileged status given to France that permitted Facebook users to visually demonstrate their grief for its people over others, this expression of loyalty to any nation undermines Butler's vision of a politics that is built on a collective precariousness rooted in all human existence.

The way in which Facebook as a private enterprise facilitated specific, nationally-inflected forms of grieving highlights one of the key critiques of Butler's theory of precarity raised by Jodi Dean (2008), namely that Butler's delineation of sovereign power is too simplistic. Butler's post 9/11 writings display consistent alarm about how the suspension of law during the War on Terror has created a new, unwieldy state of sovereignty. This example is made most powerfully through her examination of the convergence of governmentality and sovereignty within the walls of Guantanamo Bay, where the indefinite detention for many who are held there demonstrates how American government forces can be construed as a sovereign power accountable to no international law (Butler, 2004, p. 68). However, Dean contends that Butler's focus on the law leads to a limited view of how sovereignty works within globalised, communicative capitalism (Dean, 2008, p. 110). Butler's narrow legal perspective ignores the way in which non-governmental economic, corporate, and financial concerns determine political policy (Dean, 2008, p. 115). Dean puts forward a more pluralistic perspective of the diverse and multiple ways in which sovereignty plays out in the contemporary moment, challenging what she perceives to be Butler's very literal interpretation of arbitrary, exploitative power (2008, p. 110). Drawing from the work of Slavoj Žižek, Dean reasons that domination in our contemporary moment is characterised not by obedience to an overwhelming force, but rather through never-ending consumption within a capitalist system, a process that incites us with the promise to endlessly transform and remould ourselves (2008, p. 117). The adoption of the French flag feature on Facebook, itself a commercial platform, can be perceived as a way of altering our own consumable, constructed "brand". The commercial gain or value of such a feature, described by one commentator as a "performative requirement" (Lee, 2015), is difficult to ascertain. However, it is worth reflecting about the function of this feature in a neoliberal economy, which, as Carolyn Pedwell (2014) argues, places a market value on empathy due to its professed capability to offer a means of effective relation between different groups across national and geo-political boundaries. Butler's request that we turn inwards to examine our own pre-

cariousness and vulnerability is still entangled with a concept of reciprocity that undergirds an empathetic perspective. Strangely absent from both *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life* is a recognition of the way in which the promotion of a shared vulnerability is complicated by its place in an "empathy economy", which figures compassion as a tool that must be possessed by the self-managing and self-enterprising neoliberal individual (Pedwell, 2012, p. 287). Butler's commentary is thus slightly blinkered to how the pressure to perform empathy demonstrates our embroilment within an economic model that demands emotional competency. The impetus to pledge our allegiance to Paris through Facebook is underwritten by a system of governmental, social, and economic forms of power which are perhaps too complex to be incorporated into the version of sovereignty that Butler outlines in the texts under examination.

Speaking to the Present Reality

There are, of course, no simple ways in which to alter the current framing of the artificial divisions between the West and "the Other", a position that Butler confirmed at her talk in Liège. When an audience member asked Butler directly about the course of action that Europe collectively should take after these attacks, she responded that we should create an overwhelming movement that embodies nonviolence. Butler tempered these comments by acknowledging that she knows this is an unrealistic position currently, that her beliefs "don't always speak to the present reality" (Butler, 2015a). Salih's statement that readers of the philosopher's texts should not expect "radical accessibility" can thus be adapted to the statements that she makes in her role as a public intellectual (2004, p. 1). Butler's advocacy of a recognition of our collective precariousness as a means to dismantle precarity has been characterised as a "precarious proposition" in our political climate (Watson, 2012, p. 1). While Butler's perspective is somewhat constrained by its lack of engagement with how economic concerns shape the formations of political power in a neoliberal economy, the utility of her theory of precarity rests in its ability to connect an existential-phenomenological account of liveability to sociopolitical arguments about the ways in which recognition and grievability are distributed unequally along gendered and racialised lines (Schippers, 2014, p. 3). Though social media platforms such as Facebook attempted to circumscribe mourning in specific ways, the reaction to these measures can be seen as a form of resistance to this framing of events. Commentaries such as Ciezadlo's, collated opinion pieces produced by outlets such as *NPR* [National Public Radio] and *The Metro* demonstrate small yet significant critiques of existing norms, which allocate recognition differentially. These disparate voices thus offer a tentative disruption to what writer Teju Cole (2015) has described as the "con-

sensus about mournable bodies [which suggests that] certain violent deaths are more meaningful, and more worthy of commemoration, than others."

References

Barnard, A. (2015, November 15). Beirut, also the site of deadly attacks, feels forgotten. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/world/middleeast/beirut-lebanon-attacks-paris.html?smid=tw-share&_r=1.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2000). *Antigone's claim: Kinship between life and death*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, J. (2004). *The Judith Butler reader*. S. Salih (Ed). Oxford: Blackwell.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London: Verso.

Butler, J. (2015a, November 16). "Evaluer l'esprit critique" [Lecture].

Butler, J. (2015b, November 14). Mourning becomes the law. Judith Butler from Paris. *Verso*. Retrieved from http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2337-mourning-becomes-the-law-judith-butler-from-paris.[4]

Campbell, T., & Sitze, A. (2013). Biopolitics: An encounter. In T. Campbell & A. Sitze (Eds.), *Biopolitics: A Reader* (pp. 1-40). Durham: Duke University Press.

Chrisafis, A. (2016, January 10). Thousands gather in Paris as Hollande leads tributes to terror attack victims. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/10/thousands-gather-paris-president-hollande-leads-terror-attacks-tribute.

Chittal, N. (2015, November 14). How social media played a role in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. *MSNBC*. Retrieved from http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/how-social-media-played-role-the-aftermath-the-paris-attacks.

Ciezadlo, A. (2015, November 17). Paris is a city. Beirut is a "war zone." The way we talk about those places matters. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/17/beirut-is-no-more-of-a-war-zone-than-paris-is-stop-talking-about-it-that-way/.

Cole, T. (2015, January 9). Unmournable bodies. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies.

Dean, J. (2008). Change of address: Butler's ethics at sovereignty's deadlock. In T. Carver & S. A. Chambers (Eds.). *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters* (pp. 92-106). London: Routledge.

Lee, P. Young (2015, November 16). Spare us your French flag filter: The self-indulgent social media performance doesn't help anyone. *Salon*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2015/11/16/facebooks_pointless_french_flag_filter_the_self_indulgent_social_media_performance_that_doesnt_help_anyone/.

Lloyd, M. (2008). Towards a cultural politics of vulnerability: Precarious lives and ungrievable deaths. In T. Carver & S. A. Chambers (Eds.). *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters* (pp. 109-126). London: Routledge.

Mills, J. (2015, November 15). Why didn't Facebook offer a Lebanon flag profile picture after the Beirut bombings? *The Metro*. Retrieved from: http://metro.co.uk/2015/11/15/why-didnt-facebook-offer-a-lebanon-flag-profile-picture-after-the-beirut-bombings-5502871/#ixzz3wsIHb592.

Pedwell, Carolyn. (2014). *Affective relations: The transnational politics of empathy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pedwell, Carolyn. (2012). Economies of empathy: Obama, neoliberalism, and social justice. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 30(2)*, 280-297.

Sanders, S. (2015, November 21). #MemeOfTheWeek: French Flags On Facebook. *NPR*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2015/11/21/456820583/-memeoftheweek-french-flags-on-facebook.

Schippers, B. (2014). *The political philosophy of Judith Butler*. New York: Routledge.

Université de Liège (2015, September 24). Les défenseurs d'une société plus équitable. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bufbrj7QemE.

Watson, J. (2012). Butler's biopolitics: Precarious community. *Theory & Event, 15(2)*, 1-13.

Wilcox, L (2015). *Bodies of violence: Theorizing embodied subjects in international relations*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015.

Notes

1. The article was written before the Brussels attacks on 22 March 2016.
2. See *Antigone's Claim: The Kinship of Life and Death* (2000).
3. Ciezadlo quotes David Shariatmadari: "Isis hates Middle Eastern civilisation too", *The Guardian*, 16 November 2015.
4. The text appears to have been taken down from the Verso website.