

Aula 6

JUDITH BUTLER

META

To introduce students to Judith Butler, by placing some emphasis on her representativeness to feminism in general and gender studies in particular.

OBJETIVO

To provide a sketch of her early life and education;
To make explicit a connection between her work and feminism
To introduce students to a few issues addressed by her in one of her books.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the formation and development of gender studies;
Notions of the main concepts employed in gender studies.
Familiarity with the relationship between literary theory and gender studies.

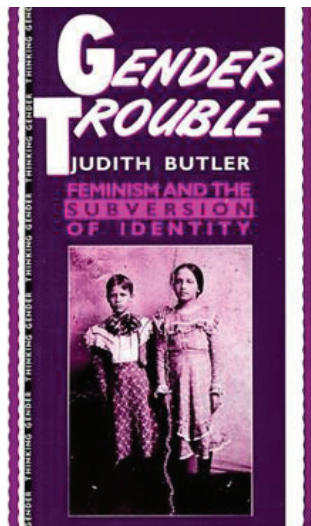
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INTRODUCTION

In lesson II, you were introduced to some basic information on gender studies. We talked about its a definition, tenets as well as the main terms that part of the terminology commonly used by scholars from this field. Additionally, we outlined a brief history of its development. Such knowledge will be of great avail for this present lesson, since we now intend to get you familiarized with a scholar whose work has yielded international acclaim for its contribution to gender studies in particular and feminism in general. Furthermore, other fields somehow linked to feminism also profited from her writings, as it seems to be the case with **Queer Theory [1]**, to which her *Gender Trouble* – a book to which we will come back later – is considered as one of the founding texts.

Ver glossário no final da Aula

Right from the outset, we should make a remark on the reception her work has been met. Since the 1990s, when her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* was first published, Judith Butler experienced a rising wave of success, which culminated – one might say – in her becoming an “academic superstar”. Over 100.000 copies of her book has been sold and she has been widely cited in various works produced under the influence of feminism. Therefore, despite the criticism that no scholar, no matter how brilliant, is unable to appease, she is rather popular in academic circles as well as in activist movements of feminist orientation. However, one cannot say likewise concerning the conservative sections of society according to which her work is the root of many social issues. Her visit to Brazil, at the beginning of this year, for example, provoked a hostile response from religious conservative groups, whom accused her of creating a theory that has destabilizing families by her suggestion that gender identities are not as fixed (or natural) as it has been thought until recently.



Cover of the first edition

In any case, our primary interest is to provide a sketch of her life and some of the issues she addresses in her work, which are of great value for gender studies and feminism, not to get involved in the debate over the controversial nature of her arguments and assertions. We will leave this for a future occasion when you are proficient in the matter.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Judith Pamela Butler was born in February 24th 1956 in Cleveland, Ohio. Her family was of Jewish ascendancy, which might partly explain her later interest in Zionism – of which she is an energetic critic – and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both of which she has explicitly addressed, as in her 2012 book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. Such circumstances will play a significant role in her introduction to philosophy. According to her, she first started to study philosophy in her synagogue, under the supervision of a rabbi to whom she had been sent for having become a disciplinary problem in the Hebrew school class (see interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf4px4KyqbY>). Such experience allowed her to read widely and eventually provided her with a consistent foundation upon which she would build her intellectual career.



The Theodor W. Adorno Award is presented to Judith Butler in 2012

Fonte: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_W_Adorno_Award#/media/File:Adorno-preis-2012-judith-butler-felix-semmelroth-ffm-289.jpg

While in high school, she attended two college courses on philosophy, one being an introduction to philosophy and the other on ethics. Later, she went to Bennington and, after two years, she transferred to Yale, where she received her B.A. in 1978 and her Ph.D. in 1984. Her graduate student experience coincided with the emergence of women's studies as an academic discipline during which period she engaged herself in women's groups. These exchanges certainly had some impact on her later produc-

tion, since she has been a prominent supporter of such groups and an activist herself whose engagement manifests itself through her travelling around the world delivering talks on gender as well as other relevant topics appertaining sexuality.

From the 1990s onwards, she has been the recipient of many prizes and awards that have rendered her success evident in academia. In 2008, she was given the Mellon Award for her exemplary contributions to scholarship in the humanities. Four years later, her work was honored with the Theodor W. Adorno Award, a highly coveted German prize recognizing her accomplishments in gender, sexuality, critical theory and moral philosophy. She has also been elected Doctorate of Letters, *honoris causa*, by a number of universities, among which are that of Belgrade and Fribourg. She is currently a Maxine Elliot Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory, where she has worked since the 1990s.



Let us turn now to one of her most influential work, which has been referred to as one of the foundations to queer theory. Brought to light in 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* advances her argument on gender performativity according to which “gender is made by performance” – or by “doing” if you will. We will come back to it later. But first, we must provide you with a brief account of some of the topics upon which she touches throughout the first chapter of the book, which will be the target of our attention here. She starts out by addressing a conceptual debate, which has been brought to central stage by third wave feminism, namely, that of “women” as the subject of feminism. The use of

this term [women] came under heavy criticism from *in- and outside* feminist circles, since it has been unable to represent individuals that do not belong to Western European societies. In other words, it has excluded or failed to address the diversified reality of “third-world”, non-Western women who do not feel represented by this once-supposed-universal category of “woman”. Butler asserts that

The term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (1999: 6).

Departing from this perspective, therefore, one cannot say that being a woman “means” the same “everywhere”, “anytime” in history. This realization has been the driving force behind the attacks directed against its alleged universality. Along with the rejection of “women” as a unifying category, many are also calling into question the assumption of a universal patriarchy that bears similar traces regardless of its location. On this Butler (1999: 6) says that

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination.

It is probably due to this problematic universal understanding of oppression against women that many Western women seem to be unable to look at a **burka [2]** as anything other than a symbol of male oppression of which “oriental” women are victims. Is there really something universal about women oppression or women themselves? What do you think of the following cartoon by Malcolm Evans?

Ver glossário no final da Aula



[www.http://arteseacai.wixsite.com](http://arteseacai.wixsite.com)

For her, this desire for a unified, stable and coherent subject for feminism is no longer functional for which reason feminists must reformulate its representational politics on some other need.

Butler also challenges a common distinction that has been made by many feminists between “sex” and “gender”. You were introduced to it in the second lesson of this course. According to her, such a binary understanding made it possible for feminists to assert that being born in a “male body” – taken to be a natural fact – might not ensue becoming a “man” – which is considered a cultural construct – and vice-versa. In other words, sex was to nature as gender to culture. Despite the apparent logic of this argument, she seems to be suspicious of its veracity. Understanding sex from such a dichotomic perspective prevents one to realize a very important aspect: that sex is itself a gendered category.

Therefore, it is problematic this radical splitting between these two terms. Butler is of the opinion that sex is not necessarily a given, an irrefutable natural fact, as it has been purported by many people. It is otherwise produced by scientific and juridical discourses that need such a binary division [that between sex and gender] to survive as a prediscursive “fact”. To put it roughly, she seems to believe that one cannot think of sex without the notion of gender, since it is through the latter that the former is “constructed”. She adds that

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (1999:11).

As you can see, she suggests that “sex” is not as natural as one may think. Her conclusion is that a distinction based on “naturalness” versus “artificiality” (in the sense of being man made) has no foundation. Or – she goes even further – the very distinction between them seems to be a discursive stratagem whose aim is to conceal the “unnatural” character of the category of “sex”, to which she concludes that “It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category” (Butler, 1999:11).

There is yet another concluding point she makes on such a distinction. She argues that “gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception)”, because it “... must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (Butler, 1999:11).

She also points out the problematic circularity of the contemporary debate on gender. Firstly, she takes up Simone De Beauvoir’s argumentation according to which one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman. Beauvoir, says she, seems to believe in a degree of agency in the construction of gender. Butler, on the other hand, suggests that there is a determinism in the assigning of meanings to anatomically differentiated bodies, which are taken as recipients of some sort of cultural law. In the case described by Beauvoir, there are discursive limits within which gender can be imaginable and realizable. To put it differently, there are discursive [in the broader sense of the term] boundaries that condition the assigning of meaning. For example, if one is born in a female body, it is expected by society that one “becomes” a woman. Such limitations are determined by a hegemonic cultural discourse based on binary thinking. It is such discourse that labels an individual “deviant” if they have a female body, yet “behaves” and “feels like” a man.

After making some remarks on Beauvoir’s notion of gender, she moves forward to point out some of Irigaray’s comments on the impossibility of representing women in a masculine-oriented culture. For her, under such circumstances, women will always be defined in relation to “men”, as its opposite or negative. Butler concludes that

The problematic circularity of a feminist inquiry into gender is underscored by the presence of positions which, on the one hand, presume that gender is a secondary characteristic of persons and those which, on the other hand, argue that the very notion of the person, positioned within language as a “subject,” is a masculinist construction and prerogative which effectively excludes the structural and semantic possibility of a feminine gender (BUTLER, 1999: 16)

As you may have noticed, so far we have placed some emphasis on the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*. The reason behind this lies in the fact that the ques-

tions she raises therein seem to be fundamental for those newly introduced to *gender studies* and the debates that have drawn scholars' attention of late. From this point onwards, however, we will continue make a few more remarks in a more cursory fashion, since the issues upon which we intended to dwell are already listed above. This being said, you must bear in mind that Butler uses her first chapter to question the very central assumptions of feminist theory as well as the very language employed by it, which she labels problematic, by virtue of not being able to dialogue properly with issues of class, ethnicity and sexuality. At last, she will propose a new feminism that is able to critique the notions that form the very basis of identity and gender.

In the following chapters, Butler will occupy herself with more complex theoretical issues, such as the critique of patriarchy the way it has been understood and used as a concept within feminism. She will turn to the works of important figures such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose notion of incest will be discussed; the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere on whose description of “womanliness as a masquerade” she will focus and eventually Freud. In addition, she will also allude to the feminist theorist Monique Wittig's thinking of lesbianism and Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), all of which we shall not discuss here, since it would prove besides our objectives for this class.

Towards the end of the book, Butler will propose a new intersectional feminism, that is, a feminism that will account for differences that have not been dealt with by other versions of feminism. Differences such as those of race, ethnicity, religion, class, identity, etc. For feminism to work out, it must take such elements into consideration, under the pain of speaking for the interests of a particular group only. For instance, intersectional feminism must be aware that a black woman might have to deal on a daily basis not only with sexism, but also racism. Same thing could be said about a black poor woman, whom in addition to being discriminated against on the grounds of her race and gender, she might also face some prejudice by virtue of her social class. Is it clear now what intersectional feminism is? We really do hope so. If not, you can always go online and read a few articles about it. This will certainly clarify your doubts on the matter.

There is yet one more point to which we have to come back: that of gender performativity. This is a central notion in Butler's work. But what does it mean? Is it possible to translate that into more simple terms? We will try to do it in a concise fashion. The very term was coined by her in the book whose first chapter we focused on earlier. According to her, by gender performativity, she means that gender is constituted through a “repetition of acts”, behaviors, roles, whose playing we are compelled to do by society. Such acts and behaviors are not made by us, but imposed on us from a very early age. A child is made to comply with such acts and behaviors that are seen to express its gender properly.

The playing of such roles has become so naturalized that people think they are part of one's nature. Butler says, however, that no one is born a certain gender, but becomes or constitutes oneself into a given gender. “Constitutes” is a key verb to understand what she says about the performative nature of gender. According

to her, we should not mistake “performativity” for “performance”. To say that gender is a performance might mislead people to think that it is a “costume” that can be put on and taken off whenever one pleases. It is not quite so. Therefore, gender is not simply a “performance”, but “performative”.

We must then make evident what it means to be “performative”. If something is performative, it “produces” certain effects. It “does”/“accomplishes” something. Butler used the notion of performativity present in the work by J.L. Austin *Doing Things with Words*, in which he talks about the performative nature of some utterances. A frequently mentioned example is that of the “I do” utterance in a wedding ceremony. When someone says this, they are not only showing their consent to marry their partner, but also validating the wedding ceremony itself, since after such a declaration they made into a spouse. That is what it means to be performative.

Another example is when a judge declares someone “guilty” at a trial. Such an utterance “accomplishes/produces” certain effects. In this case, it would be the condemnation of the defendant. It is a performative speech act, as Austin would put it. Now, how can this be applied to gender? When Butler says that gender is performative, she is actually asserting that by repeating certain “acts”, “roles” and “behaviors”, one not only communicates but also creates an identity. If one is doing something that is usually taken as feminine, one is not only showing other people one is a woman [or of this gender], but one is turning oneself into a given gender. This has a lot to do with what Beauvoir said in her “one is not born a woman, but becomes one”. Butler argues in a similar vein, one is not born a self, one becomes or creates a self through social pressure, which makes them conform to reiterate and repeat the norms through which one ends up being constituted. It, therefore, by performing certain acts that a person constructs their own gender. Is the notion of “gender performativity” any clearer now? We hope it is.

CONCLUSION

It is needless to say that there are many more interesting aspects about Butler’s work, which are worth reflecting upon. Only this seems not to be the right moment to undertake such a challenging enterprise. Our intent was to tell you a little about her life and focus on some of the issues she addresses in the first chapter of her *Gender Trouble*, given their relevance for feminist theory and the debates that have been taking place in feminist academic circles. You should also know that what has been presented is just a small sample of what you will find if you decide to read her work in a more detailed fashion. Despite all the controversy surrounding her claims on gender, the reading of her books – given their far-reaching influence – seems to be an indispensable step if one wants to get involved in contemporary feminist debates or even understand what has been theorized about gender.



RESUMO

In this class, you will see a short biographical sketch of Judith Pamela Butler, born in February 24th 1956 in Cleveland, Ohio. An American philosopher and gender theorist of international acclaim, Judith Butler has influenced feminism, queer and literary theory. Her books – in particular *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) – have been widely used within feminist settings. Amongst her main theoretical contributions is the notion of gender performativity, i.e., the fact that gender is constituted through a repetition of acts or behaviors, which are not natural, but socially assigned. In addition to offering some biographical notes, we will also place some emphasis on the first chapter of the above-mentioned book, since it addresses issues of great relevance for feminist theory and contemporary debates on gender. Also because we think this is a timely occasion to introduce you to such questions.



ATIVIDADES

Write a summary of the main points discussed in this class. Try not to exceed two pages.

ACTIVITY COMMENT

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer com que você construa uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta aula. O desenvolvimento desta habilidade será fundamental para estudos futuros.



PRÓXIMA AULA

Queer Theory

GLOSSARY

[1] Queer Theory is a field of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorisation of 'queerness' itself. Heavily influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory

Burka [2] also known as chadri or paranja in Central Asia, is an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions to cover themselves in public, which covers the body and the face (source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burqa>)

WORKS BY JUDITH BUTLER

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- 2015: Senses of the Subject
- 2013: Dispossession: the performative in the political (com Athena Athanasiou)
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- 2007: Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging (com Gayatri Spivak)
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