

Book Review: *Judith Butler and Politics* by Adriana Zaharijević, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 256 pages. ISBN: 9781399517089



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

SPECIAL ISSUE

BOOK REVIEW

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Adriana Zaharijević's *Judith Butler and Politics* is a difficult book to review, at least if we consider that the purpose of a review is to provide a condensed version of the main arguments pursued in the book, followed by an evaluation of its merits and shortcomings. Instead, I will offer some remarks on what this book accomplishes and tease out a number of key problems that left me thinking while and after reading this important book.

First, this is not a book to be read quickly. It invites slow and careful reading. Zaharijević's prose is not that of the typical academic monograph; it flows, carefully crafts its sections and departs from a chronological construction of its arguments. The book keeps its reader on their toes, irrespective of whether they are new to Butler's work or seasoned readers. Readers new to Butler will be carefully accompanied by Zaharijević's proximate knowledge of their work, where core concepts found in Butler's books – performativity, sex/gender, agency, bodies, norms, vulnerability, liveability and non-violence – are not just fully explained but also used. Zaharijević goes deep into the nooks and crannies of Butler's conceptual architecture and, crucially, *performs* Butler's philosophy in her own writing. The book does not simply reproduce or correctly explain Butler's arguments but instead takes the reader through them, drawing on new examples to illustrate the ideas, using different starting points to situate Butler's work. Readers who are already familiar with Butler's work will also benefit from this book; in it, they will encounter re-interpretations of Butler's work and an engagement with recent scholarship that has presented conceptual critiques of Butler's concepts.

The book is structured in two main parts: a first part titled 'Performativity' (composed of chapters on 'Bodies and Norms' and 'Agency') is followed by a second one titled 'Liveable World' (with chapters on 'Liveable Life' and 'Non-violence'). Part I is preceded by an important opening chapter, 'Ontology and Politics', which presents the analytical angle that shapes the book's approach. There, Zaharijević presents what she calls the possible leitmotif of her book: 'insurrection at the level of ontology', which is Butler's phrase from *Precarious Life*. The ontological focus is critical for Zaharijević and

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enables her to open two distinct yet deeply related pathways: the philosophical and the political. In this opening chapter, Zaharijević introduces the motif, or, rather, the movement, of *in media res*, showing that the political sentiment emerges *in the midst* of the philosophising in Butler's work. The philosophical and the political are not two discrete moments in Butler but rather shape and are shaped by each other, sometimes harmoniously, other times in tension. This sentiment is important since, as Zaharijević points out at the book's outset, the two registers of the philosophical and the political make different demands and operate with different tempos; while the latter works with urgency, immediacy and conviction, the other demands deceleration, ambivalence and a certain slowness. Zaharijević engages with the frustration that some readers experience when encountering Butler's thoughts—when they impatiently demand to know the political programme, the solutions and the resolutions to the world's troubles. Yet, Zaharijević shows that, first, Butler's meta-philosophy perhaps functions otherwise and that, second, the political content one seeks is in fact there, at least if one reads closely. After all, Butler's political positions are not obscure or unclear; they live them out in public and also write about them. That someone demands that those positions necessarily follow from the conceptual work, and critiques the writer's work simply because that tight link cannot be established, is a demand that reveals more about the reader rather than the writer.

Importantly, and interestingly, in the opening chapter is a section which Zaharijević dedicates to cultural translation, a notion in Butler's work that does not receive the attention that it deserves. Zaharijević reflects on the idea that no sociality is possible without translation, that the translation of cultural horizons is a slow and political process that is deeply tied to a radical democratic framework where everyone can equally participate in the contestation of universality. Zaharijević considers how cultural translation is an important process for Butler's call for collective action and their attempts to understand how and why different struggles occur in different geographical contexts but also how progressive coalitional projects and alliances can emerge amid differences. In the introduction to the book, Zaharijević refers to the linguistic process of writing the book, partially translated from Serbian to English, a language which might not be the author's first language. This calls for reflection on what it means to receive and be transformed by ideas that come to you from another language, and what culturally translating those ideas into one's culture – Serbian Southeast/Central European in the case of Zaharijević; Maltese Southern European in my case – does to those ideas.

In the book's Part I, Zaharijević unpacks Butler's work on performativity, elaborating on this through a double concern, with bodies and norms on the one hand and agency on the other. This reading strategy of doubling is one that cuts across the entire book, showcased in the double movement of philosophy and politics, the double movement of agency amid constraints and the double movement of liveability and non-violence. This way of reading highlights the dynamic movement of Butler's thought. In her work, Zaharijević does not seek to pin down Butler's thought, preserves its processuality and respects its spiral development – the way it steps forward but returns to previous thematics – drawing on evolving conceptual clusters to animate a problem anew or to redescribe it through a new philosophical vocabulary that simultaneously opens up new dynamics of the same problems.

This way of reading also animates Zaharijević's approach to using sources. Although, *prima facie*, the book's first part seems to concern itself with Butler's pre-2001 writings, while the second part tends to focus on the post-2001 works, Zaharijević rightly argues that this division is not as sharp. Despite the habits of commentators

to, again impatiently, pigeonhole works into neat categories, Butler's work defies and resists that easy classification. After all, is that not a principal lesson in their work; namely, that categories leak? As a result, we find references to *Notes Toward a Theory of Assembly* 'as early as' the second chapter, which mainly concerns itself with bodies and norms in Butler's earlier work, while we keep coming across references to *Gender Trouble* until the final chapter, which deals with Butler's more recent work on non-violence. This decision enables Zaharijević's writing to flow in a more narrative way, allowing Butler's various texts to converse with each other rather than leaving them by the wayside as the chapters move on to engage with more recent books.

Part I covers the key debates raised by Butler's early work, particularly *Gender Trouble* and its responses to it. It considers the relation between bodies and norms, challenges the claim that bodies are 'absent' in Butler's early works, and unpacks Butler's complex deconstruction of the sex/gender distinction. When it comes to the theoretical debates in question, Zaharijević's approach is exhaustive and patiently goes through the foundational theoretical moves in Butler's work. However, it would have been interesting had the book engaged with contemporary cultural politics (if not 'culture wars') on issues of sex and gender, showing how views similar to Butler's, as well as views that are erroneously attributed to them, function like a spectre (or a phantasm, to invoke Butler's term on this issue) in political discussions and proposed regressive legislation on sex and gender. It must, however, be acknowledged, that Butler engaged with this matter the most in *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, a book which post-dates Zaharijević's by a year. With that said, while meticulous theoretical reconstruction is important, readers might have also appreciated reflections on the theoretical and cultural 'afterlives' of Butler's ideas, i.e., how these have been received or resisted in the global public spheres as well as social movements.

In the third chapter of her book, Zaharijević presents a masterful account of Butler's theory of agency, convincingly arguing that the theory of performativity must be understood as a theory of agency. In this chapter, Zaharijević responds to the reductive interpretations of performativity as parody, as well as the confusing contradictory readings of performativity as voluntarism and determinism. Zaharijević here opens up the discussion to consider agency in terms of three inter-connected registers: the individual, the social and the collective. She responds to critics who argue that Butler's account of performativity leaves the reader with a sense that resistance is either impossible or too easy. Instead, Zaharijević carefully crafts agency as the intertwining of resistance and constraint, a radically conditioned form of agency whereby the subject is enabled by norms that shape it.

With this powerful account of agency, Zaharijević sets the scene for Part II of her book, which turns to consider the development of Butler's philosophical vocabulary, where notions such as precariousness, liveability and relationality become the cluster of concepts with which Butler's post-2001 works operate. Zaharijević considers the related thematics opened up by Butler's use of different verbs – to recognise, to appear, to be jettisoned – with each pointing to Butler's readings and re-readings of figures they are thinking with and against – such as Hegel on recognition; Arendt on the space of appearance, the paradox of human rights and the right to have rights; and Agamben on *zoe* and *bios* and biopolitics. In this chapter, we see how the notion of dispossession becomes important in Butler's work, enabling Zaharijević to bring into the discussion Butler's rich conversation with Athena Athanasiou. Then, Zaharijević moves on to show how Butler's question in *Bodies That Matter* returns again in their concern with which lives count and whose death matters, opening up the theme of

grievability and how this is connected with Butler's radical notion of equality. This points to Butler's reversal of the Socratic expression on lives worth living to a concern with lives that fall beneath the scheme of liveability, where the loss of some lives is not registered as a loss at all, implying that those lives never counted as lives.

Here, we come to another strength of Zaharijević's book; it not only reproduces the themes found in Butler's work, as if these arguments are intended primarily to convince or persuade. There is an experiential or affective register within which Butler's thoughts are operating. Zaharijević picks up on this point when she writes on how certain ideas and books have the power to move you, ecstatically carrying you beside yourself. This is the power, the poetics and the pathos of Butler's prose, where concepts have an inherent performative dimension. These are thoughts that imply an attitude, an ethos – one which is embodied by Butler not just in their published works but also in their public persona, their generosity in engaging with activists and social movements and letting their work be inspired and transformed by such encounters. Butler's politics do not stop at monographs and published works but rather spring forth in their interventions in ongoing political developments and reflections on the conditions for critical thought within contemporary universities where dissent is increasingly silenced and academic freedom has become a signifier for espousing problematic views. An exploration of this more public dimension of Butler's thought would have been a valuable inclusion in this book.

The final chapter of the book then covers the politics and ethics of non-violence, which Zaharijević proposes as the point where performativity and precarity meet. Here, Zaharijević considers the relationship between the body and the world in terms of four key concepts – these being vulnerability, interdependence, plurality and cohabitation. This sets the tone of the brief concluding reflection that closes the book, titled 'Our Place', where the practice of non-violence is interpreted not as a passivity but as an ethical *no*, a form of resistance to practices that deny the unchosen relationality and plural cohabitation, a closing off that is characteristic of genocidal and/or fascist passions. Zaharijević here turns to a sentiment that Butler expresses in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, which calls for institutions and policies whose purpose it is to actively preserve and affirm the open-ended cohabitation of the same world, despite the aggression that might be at the heart of the social bond. Here, we see a prescriptive gesture in Butler; a rare one, perhaps – a counterpoint to the more usual deconstructive affect of Butler's work, where the state and its institutions are more often seen as complicit in reinforcing systemic injustices. Yet, in my view, Zaharijević's reading of Butler goes beyond the deconstructive moment. Butler's work does not only call for widening possibilities and locating pockets of resistance that can enable social transformation in order for more capacious norms to come to be; it also seeks to conserve social relations and a cohabitation without violence. This project exceeds the human since it also points to the human's dependence on the non-human, the planetary and the environmental. This is a dimension of Butler's thought with which Zaharijević's book could have engaged more deeply.

Zaharijević's book reminds us that Butler's work embodies a profound ethico-political project. This is a far cry from characterisations of Butler's work as amounting to parodic politics, deconstruction or a poststructuralist project that lacks normativity. The question of why one must respond to vulnerability with non-violence remains unanswered and perhaps unanswerable. Zaharijević's book shows that Butler's politics is a call, which, like any other call, may or may not be received or responded to. However, it remains an open invitation.

In her book, Zaharijević leaves no stone unturned. She engages with all of Butler's books and refers to a wide range of interviews that capture the different textures of Butler's thoughts in oral form. Zaharijević digs deep both into Butler's 'minor' texts as well as the 'major' ones. Apart from the few lacunae mentioned (such as the lack of explicit focus on the planetary dimension), the book could have also considered how Butler's ideas have travelled across disciplines and geographies in order to show how these engagements extend Butler's thoughts. Of course, the book set itself the task of exploring the relationship between Butler and politics, so it is impossible to adequately accomplish other aims. If anything, this only reflects my willingness to read more while guided by Zaharijević's sensibility throughout. *Judith Butler and Politics* is a tour de force and an inspiring way of doing academic work: virtuously patient and careful (full of care). It is a testament to the view that ideas matter.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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