



# English Studies in Latin America

## Meaningful “Protests” in the Kitchen: An Interview with Judith Butler

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## Meaningful “Protests” in the Kitchen: An Interview with Judith Butler

White Rabbit Staff<sup>1</sup>

Judith Butler’s work represents a major contribution to contemporary theoretical criticism. At the same time, she has been an influential political activist for more than twenty years. Butler is, at the present, Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature and the Co-director of the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. She has been professor at Wesleyan University and John Hopkins University. Her work has significantly influenced the fields of gender studies, feminism, political philosophy and ethics. Her ideas are at the origin of what today is known as Queer Theory, fundamentally a performative theory, according to which sex and sexuality, rather than being something natural, are, like gender, something culturally constructed. Butler’s proposition is the de-naturalization of concepts such as sex, gender, desire, as long as they are understood as constructions that constitute cultural norms which force and violate the will of all those subjects who do not conform to them.

Many decades after Foucault and his poignant critique of psychoanalysis, Butler makes sexual identity –and sexual minorities’ rights– an example of how culturally constructed/subjective identities play a significant role in maintaining mainstream mechanisms of domination. The poststructuralist philosopher, moreover, extends her analogy; what was previously represented by the struggle between classes is embodied today not only by sexual minorities’ rights but also but the problems posed by immigration, war, and all those socio-historical and political conditions currently threatening the rights inherent to the human condition all over the world. Her latest work tends to bring to public light the menace of multiple fanaticisms which reduce the other to an infra-human condition. Butler criticizes multiculturalism, oversimplified versions of gender struggle and, of course, the ideological complex used by the American government to justify its wars.

Last April, the American philosopher and activist visited Santiago de Chile, giving a series of lectures and participating in seminars and other academic activities. *White Rabbit: ESLA* contacted

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her for an interview, which you will find below. Here Butler talks to us about the use of contemporary public space in countries formerly under dictatorial regimes, contemporary mobilizations in California, her reaction to Osama Bin Laden’s death, and her current research in reference to the controversial political theorist Hannah Arendt. As always, in the midst of painful and confusing controversy, Judith Butler makes her innovative voice heard.

**Considering your talk in Santiago, Chile at the University of Diego Portales titled “The Right to Appear: Toward a New Politics of the Street” in April would you say that the recent political history of post-dictatorship countries in Latin America such as Chile is important for understanding the impact and significance of “being political” in the street”? In which ways do these contexts make street politics different than in California?**

*First, let me say that I sought to talk about street politics in Cairo and Ankara, among other places, so I hope I did not give the impression that I was talking about California (I believe I talked about some student demonstrations in California only). You are in a better position than I am to comment on street politics in Chile. But I am interested in those forms of demonstration that seek to expose people who were engaged in torture or brutality under the dictatorial regimes. I am also interested in modes of commemoration for those who have disappeared. These are both ways to make sure that contemporary public space does not enforce an amnesia about the past. Amnesty and amnesia are linked words, and the political dangers of amnesty are clear. Without a way of marking the past, it continues traumatically. And without a way of achieving justice (distinct from revenge, in my view), rage and fear can continue in unpredictable and destructive ways. There are “police cultures” that can survive from dictatorship to post-dictatorship in subtle and difficult ways.*

**As a proponent of radical democracy and given the existing global economic crisis and the disastrous effects it has had on people’s public and private lives in California, are there spaces there where you still see radical democracy at work? How would you describe your outlook on radical democracy in California in the coming years?**

*I think the struggle to enfranchise undocumented populations is crucial to the contemporary mobilizations in California. It is extremely important that those people, mainly from Mexico, who have entered the state in order to find work, or to rejoin their families, not be subject to military detention and deportation. They also deserve health care which is, in the United States, ever more difficult to secure, especially for poor people. So, the struggle against the military and police oppression of the undocumented, the struggle for bilingualism, the struggle for health care and rights of citizenship, and the struggle for affordable education are all at the forefront of California politics. Feminism, LGBTQ politics, workers rights, and anti-racism struggles are also part of each of these struggles. So I do sometimes see alliances that are moving and important.*

**We understand that you present the political space as the result of human action and speech, and as something that can occur anywhere. If the political space is understood as ubiquitous and created, is it still valid to keep the distinction between the public space and the private one in terms of political action? Is it possible to be political within the space of the home? Does this pose any contradictions with the performative act of appearance?**

*Yes, I think that politics crosses the public/private distinction. Arendt was wrong to claim in *The Human Condition* that politics belongs only to the public sphere. So-called “private” issues include sexuality, domestic labour, childcare, and food – these are all political, or potentially so. Just as the protesters in Cairo brought private life out into the street, sometimes the street ends up in the kitchen, and we find meaningful “protests” there!*

**In light of the latest developments in U.S. international politics, do you think it would be possible to make every human life publicly grievable? If so, how could it be done? And what do you think of groups, such as the Association of the Disappeared in Chile or the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who have fought to publicly grieve those whose bodies were never found?**

*I am not sure every life can be mourned as an individual life, even though I think we must affirm that every life is equally entitled to being grieved. My concern is with “populations” and, in particular, with the cultural ways in which certain lives are considered very grievable, even paradigmatically grievable, and others are considered to be no loss at all (if they did not really “exist” then how could they be lost?). The Association of the Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo struggle to interrupt the political organization of present time that would relegate the history of murder and torture to the past, and establish the “newness” of democracy and capitalist growth in its place. But histories cannot be so easily erased, especially if there are public works, demonstrations, mobilizations, and commemorations that insist on marking and grieving that history. A different kind of politics grounded in an opposition to state violence emerges from the public marking and re-marking of the grievability of those lives. I believe it is important to count and re-count them, to name and re-name them, as a way of making sure that they live on as bodies that did matter.*

**What is your opinion of the reaction and celebration of Osama Bin Laden's death in the U.S. and the delay in the release of official images, as well as the proliferation of false pictures of his body?**

*I am appalled by the national sadism that the U.S. has shown in relation to the killing of Osama bin Laden. There was never any question of arresting him. They were out to kill him, and to take public credit for the killing. They are pleased to have killed, and now the public wants to share in that pleasure: “let us see the picture of his destroyed body so that we may celebrate!”. This strikes me as a hideous affect, one that tells us more than we wish we knew about the forms of pleasure that are involved in US killing operations.*

**In your talk in Santiago, you stated that currently you are engaged in research that makes reference to the ideas of the controversial political theorist Hannah Arendt and you mentioned some of her ideas about the public, performative and associative characteristics of freedom. Could you advance us some of the meanings and implications of your current research?**

*My research has drawn upon Arendt in different ways. I have been interested in her efforts to establish a binational state in Palestine, one that was vanquished by Ben Gurion in 1948. I have been interested in the grounds by which she seeks to indict Adolph Eichmann, since there she makes this very interesting claim. For her, we cannot choose with whom to cohabit the earth. We cohabit with others prior to any question of choice, and we do not get a choice about which populations may live, and which may die. So she makes a strong and compelling case against genocide, but she also offers a way of thinking about human sociality that is distinct from classical liberal forms of contractual individualism.*

*Arendt of The Human Condition consequentially and mistakenly separated the sphere of the public from the sphere of the private. In the sphere of the private we find the question of needs, the reproduction of the material conditions of life, the problem of transience, of reproduction and death alike – everything that pertains to precarious life. The possibility of whole populations being annihilated either through genocidal policies or systemic negligence follows not only from the fact that there are those who believe they can decide among whom they will inhabit the earth, but because such thinking presupposes a disavowal of an irreducible fact of politics: the vulnerability to destruction by others follows from all modes of political and social interdependency, and constitutes a demand on all political forms.*

*A different social ontology would have to start from this shared condition of precarity in order to refute those normative operations, pervasively racist, that decide in advance who counts as human and who does not. The point is not to rehabilitate humanism, but accept not only human animality, but shared precarity. Perhaps this feature of our lives can become the basis for the rights to protection against genocide, whether deliberate or negligent. After all, even though our interdependency constitutes us as more than thinking beings, indeed as social and embodied, vulnerable and passionate, our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of that very interdependency. Indeed, our thinking relies on a bodily life that can never fully be sequestered in any private sphere – indeed, for thinking to become political, there must be a body that, even in Arendt’s own term, “appears.” Arendt clearly thought that thinking might bind us to others, and so give us a way to think the social bond to which we are committed when we think. My sense is that our commitments emerge as well by virtue of other kinds of proximities, living up against the neighbor, with others we never knew, and never chose.*