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The fragile subject of security

Butler's theory of vulnerability

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The shift in political temperament and the framing of political events after 11 September 2001 prompt a reflexion on subjectivity and vulnerability. This is the starting point for two of Judith Butler's recent books, *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In simple psychological terms, few would contest that the attacks on the U.S. together with the political mobilization they so quickly and seamlessly opened for were due to a wake-up call of Americans to a kind of *vulnerability*. The too general and often too hasty conclusions about the meaning and political implications of the events of 9/11 give a sense that something crucial had been loss, a sense that something of the self had been weakened and that a certain invincibility had been disrupted.

The Enlightenment subject. Any number of accounts of the Western modernity will place a distinct notion of the *subject* at as its *alpha* and *omega*. This tacit notion of the subject structuring the very idea of rationality, anchoring politics, and setting the premisses for moral reflexion, grows out of a Cartesian philosophical universe that has thrived for centuries. The critical re-readings of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, at the close of the 19th century, followed by many others began to expose and analyze the assumptions of this distinctly cartesian subject: It is rational, autonomous, sovereign, self-conscious, self-present, unified, stable, and above all free. More recent research in gender studies, critical anthropology and subaltern studies have added awareness that the subject, passed on through the cartesian heritage is also male, Eurocentric and Northern. By extension, a wide range of critical accounts of the modern subject have in the last decades emphasized the historical situation of the subject, its social and cultural setting, its politics and its inscription in a field of power.

In short, the evolving forms of the Enlightenment subject revolves around a certain notion of self-sufficiency and sovereignty. Moreover, these forms of the political subject support a broad set of value premises, ethical calculations and political strategies, many of which, in the

American case, have been put into question by the events of 9/11 in both popular discourse, and as a platform for geopolitical action. The sovereign subject of American geopolitics has been cast open, exposed and made vulnerable by these events. The symbolic borders of the U.S. territory have been violated and the technological invulnerability of a superpower has been laid bare. The symbolic and moral force of this alone should not be underestimated.

Clearly, however, the disruption of the sovereign self-sufficiency of the American geopolitical subject has by no means disabled or preclude political action. On the contrary, we can observe that it is the very disruption or displacement of the political subject that directly or indirectly *generates* action. Countless political analyses of 9/11 take exactly this kind of reaction, or even reactivity, as the point of departure for understanding a new chapter in geopolitics, based, more or less, on political and ethical business as usual. In these analyses the injury, the damage, the insult are taken as simple indices of future threats, inserted into a finite political formula or calculation based on a realist mechanics of of geopolitical force. Butler's theory of the precarious subject takes issue with this approach.

Bulter's 9th book *Precarious LIfe* is about injury, damage and loss, of the kind that was produced, in an exemplary sort of way, by the shared experience of 9/11. It is precisely this shared experience, this shared-ness, and not the question of objective or physical threat or damage, that is the starting point for Butler's analysis of the events. What is more, she does not take the injury performed under the attacks itself as the object of the analysis, but rather examines the *conditions* of its possibility, the 'injurability' of the political and moral subject in general, asking what kind of subject let's itself be injured by such an attack. And if such a subject is not directly, physically implicated in the death and destruction brought about by this or any other violence, what is, in general, our relationship to that violence? She answers:

> One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition I can will away. No security measure will foreclose this dependency; no violent act of sovereignty will rid the world of this fact. […] (2004: xii).

Taking the place of the geopolitical subject

The violence of the attacks of 9/11 takes hold of the political and ethical subject, or perhaps most prominently the geopolitical subject, in several ways. ***Firstly***, it is most evidently the materialization of concrete or determinate exposure to a certain kind of danger, material

danger becoming material damage. ***Secondly***, this materialization enacts a certain fantasy of threat, focuses it, intensifies it and, in certain ways, disappoints it. The livable, empirical, material damage plays a psychic role in exhausting violence. The fantasy of complete material destruction satisfies a drive for completion or totality, a need to complete, totalize, and encapsulate suffering as discharged, the work of mourning as finished. Yet while material calamity projects, it does not entirely satisfy, a cataclysmic need for completing suffering by suffering completely. ***Thirdly***, material damage opens the specter of danger to the *reality* of others, to the experience of violence as done by others, by imagined or real persons, with concrete aims, material means, and with more or less malicious intent. ***Finally***, and in the same movement of thought or self-insight, it *re-cloaks* these others, establishes them as occult, configures them through the stealth of their nefarious aims, the invisibility and above incomprehensibility of their lives for us.

It is in part this secrecy, this anonymity of the other, the impossibility of knowing for sure who or what it is, the otherness of the other which stands at the centre of Butler's analysis. It is our incapacity to entirely share the experience, the experience of being forced to only imagine it, and the need, in ethical terms, to project it, to fantasize, to live the ethical life of the attack, as a kind of extension of our own ethical universe. Not only is it impossible to know this other, to authentically understand the life and ambitions, fears, wants, needs, hopes, anger, frustration, desperation, of someone who would do great harm, but it is the very impossibility of knowing, the lack of access to shared experience around the event, to an understanding of what others have of experience of it, and of why and how this has led them to find ethical meaning in their actions based on that experience. It is the inadequacy or inability of our attempt to seize this, together, of course, with the shock of physical destruction and loss, that lies at the heart of our injurability.

The ethical logic of security

This is in a sense the ethical logic of security in general. Security can be conceptualized in many ways. Among these, it is an ethical or axiological concept, that is, a discourse of values. Security is a way of organizing or structuring values around facts, expectations, fears, and experiences. It is a kind of orientation relative to what is important and not important to us. Most commonly, security organizes a link between the tacit values of a given cultural or social setting and the political and technological measures marshaled to sustain it.

Security (and insecurity) are implicitly connected to the individual and to human values. The

many-faceted discourse of security is an expression of a certain philosophy of life. It expresses a certain perspective on life, of individual and collective anxieties and aspirations, of convictions about what is worth preserving and what to let go. Security is also a reflection of what we are willing to sacrifice, of what we are willing to fight or even die for.

The way that security measures themselves are shaped informed *speculation* about dangers that could materialize. Such speculations are by nature inadequately grounded in knowledge. A security measure based on adequate knowledge would erase before the fact, both insecurity itself and the need and meaningfulness of a security measure. Our injurability is in this sense a consequence of the structural inadequateness of the security knowledge.

This other or others to which we relate in our injurability exist and operate, like the discourse of security in general, in a regime of the unknown, in a place of uncertainty, risk, fantasy. It is not the concrete or determinate other that threats or brings about our injury. *Knowing* the other would cancel the injury. It is rather the experience of the unknown part of the other, the projection or fantasy or speculation, that makes injury possible. When the presence of the other is evoked through media-nourished, xenophobic image of the wild-eyed, Arabic-speaking religious fanatic, this figure is simply a placeholder, a marker, playing a kind of role in the theatre of our collective security

In a perhaps more complex way, our injurability is also linked to the injurability of the physical *other* who would do us harm. Here it seems that the only cure for our pain is the negation of the other human who authored it. (This is the work of grief in reverse.) But, for better or worse, we are required, in order to understand events, to react to the reality and to the situated-ness of the perpetrator of violence, to accept or understand, even through a demonizing denial, their own injurability, fragility or precariousness.

This moment has a double effect. *On the one hand,* there is a radicalization of the individuality of the perpetrator, singularizing him, her or them as absolute unique originator of violence borne upon infinite personal accountability. *On the other hand*, there is a force of erasing the injurability of the perpetrator, his or her, exposure to danger, threat, risk and fear, precisely those moral emotions that we would mobilize from our own experience in order to condemn others.

The phenomenology of mourning

In *Precarious Life*, Butler develops a kind of phenomenology of mourning, an analysis of

vulnerability understood as potential loss, as the presence, in potential mourning, of the death of those close to us, those ostensibly distant from us or estranged, and even ourselves, in the guise of a vision of our own deaths. This phenomenological horizon of loss invokes what Butler calls the 'human',

> ... I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human (as if there were any other way for us to start or end!). We start here not because there is a human condition that is universally shared. This is surely not yet the case. The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What makes for grievable life? (2004: 20).

The horizon of grief is the invocation of the 'human' at a level adequately general to invoke the 'we' that unites us. This 'we' constitutes then the basis for a basic ethics of recognition, a recognition of the humanity of the human. This humanity is, in the time of the global war on terror, visibly not generalized. The empirical starting point of Butler's reflexion, which accompanies this theoretical opening is that the value of life has become qualitatively differentiated. The universal value of life writ large has been disrupted in the name of assuring security, itself only possible by drawing sharp religious, moral, cultural, social even ethnic lines between good and bad, friend and foe.

> Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a 'we,' for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. […] This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies--as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure (2004: 20).

The subject-foundation of the universal position from which to engage this critique is not the shared canonical Enlightenment values of the Western subject, autonomous, sovereign, self-knowing, self-understanding, but rather our shared vulnerability. Shared vulnerability provides the foundation for a political community and for shared ethical reflexion on the meaning of political action. The expression or embodiment of this shared vulnerability is *grief*.

> Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility (2004: 23).

Grief signals a dependency, it is true. But let us be careful not to construe this dependency as a kind anthropological economy of power, opposing the one who possesses the thing that the other needs or wants, able and willing to negotiate a clear exchange against another need or

want. Grief does not integrate into this oppositional logic. Grief reflects both a loss and thereby some need to replace, reconstitute or reiterate what is gone. It also works through and a need for the need, a need for the loss. Grief is the work of generalizing lack, generalizing a need for the other, for unity, for belonging or completeness. Grief is the work of letting go, of releasing what is gone. But it is also the work of reconstructing a new whole, and the realization of the need for this completeness. It is working through of our relation to others in our new cosmos, without or beyond what was lost.

> What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very 'I' who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very 'I' is called into question by its relation (2004: 23).

Such a story, what Butler elsewhere calls 'an account of oneself' is a kind of derivative self-consciousness, or even self-knowledge. It is a way of relating to oneself about one's place in the world.

Grief and language

Grief, is not merely the loss of the object. It is, to a certain degree, the loss of the words to describe the loss of the object, to describe that empty hole in our capacity to make reference, our capacity to referentiality itself.

What grief 'expresses', if we can call it that, is the empty spot between me and the object, the unrepresentable link between me and the other. Grief is expressed in the gaping mouth, the silent sob. It is the referent of the words that will not come, the breath caught in the lungs.

Because grief represents nothing, or perhaps, rather, it is the representation of not representing anything, representality that does not represent, it puts into question conventional notions of representation. In some sense, grief is a representation not outward, but inward, and expression to oneself. We grieve by talking to ourselves, but not through silent meditation. Grief is a talking to oneself in and through the body, talking through the physical instruments of voice, breath, vocal chords, etc. to oneself, in effect a physical impossibility.

Through grief I see that not only am I *not* autonomous--for I needed and need the other that is now lost--but I am not even master of the relationship between myself and the object which is lost. This double-loss of the object is, as Butler puts it,

> … a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must (2004: 23).

The horizon of death

As in the analysis of *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler focuses on language and representation as the link to materiality and the body. Clearly, language is the conduit to public discussion and debate, the material link to other interlocutors. But it is more. By the relation to loss, to death of the other, the work of grief as a kind of expression is also a relation to death itself:

> The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own (2004: 28).

It is most remarkable to note that vulnerability, in Butler's reasoning, is not a contingent property of human beings, not a simple characteristic of humanness, which can be added or subtracted from the equation of the human. It cannot be a question of being human with being vulnerable. Vulnerability is the given, baseline, the foundation itself.

> We cannot, however, will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others. Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition? (2004: 29)

This observation might at first glance seem self-evident. If it is, then we must also explain why conventional conceptualizations of security lift us out and a way from such a view. The security discourse that dominates our lives, carrying immense consequences for our well-being is organized into a kind of teleology of vulnerability quite foreign from Butler's. It is a teleology where the *alpha*, the original, authentic or base-line 'human', and the *omega* of security, its goal or finaility, are both some non-vulnerable state. It is though the natural form of human life, should such a thing exist, were the invulnerable. This is, according to Butler, unthinkable, not for some empirical reason, but rather because vulnerability lies at the core of the subject of security.

Vulnerability as insecurity

The subject of security understood as 'in' security, or 'possessing' a thing called security, is in its kernel impossible. Subjectivity is the fundamental experience of insecurity, and insecurity that is

generalizable across a wide domain. For this reason we cannot recover the 'source of this invulnerability' in order to somehow counter it or erase it, thus recovering or reinstating, an aboriginal, invulnerable subject. We cannot make ourselves invulnerable, as is the argument, implicit or explicit, made by many entrepreneurs of security and the political class alike. The coherence of the ethical, political subject of security is its inherent vulnerability.

> … it precedes the formation of 'I.' This is a condition, a condition of being laid bare from the start and with which we cannot argue (2004: 31).

Butler means, instead, to refer to a more general concept of vulnerability and thus a more general concept of violence, differentiated from any kind of structural or systemic violence. It is a kind of primeval violence, as she says, one in which we are

> … from the start, given over to the other, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself and by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others (2004: 31).

This vulnerability, she points out, must somehow precede judgement, precede the predication of knowledge and precede the notion of physical existence as contingent, precede the primary distinction between our lives and the material support we require for the sustenance for our lives (2004: 31). To the degree that we can talk about a stable, solid, rigid, i.e. invulnerable, foundation of the subject of security, it is *vulnerability*. This fundamental vulnerability or precariousness resists predication, resists conceptualization, but above all, resists subjectivization.

In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler explains,

> To say that a life is precarious requires not only that a life be apprehended as a life, but also that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living (2009: 11).

Clearly precariousness is a form of dependency. It should however not be reduced to a simple metaphysics of dependency, to a logic of have and have-not, to satisfiable need, or satiable want. Precariousness that can be stabilized, un-precarious, removed from threat or danger, is not precariousness, but rather a risk calculation

> Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. (2009: 13).

In this sense, the theory of the precarious subject founds an ethics of sociality. It poses the

subject, the self, in a position that would be meaningless without others, both visible and invisible. Subjectivity is buoyed by obligation.

The same goes for the political and ethical subject of security. The subjectivity of security is opened by its own vulnerability. The position from which securitization takes places, from which security is invoked, or from which the exception is declared, is already necessarily fragile.

To conclude

The subject of security, to conclude, the place from which security is both mobilized and lived, embodies at least three discourses, three modes of being.

The ***first*** is a social or anthropological mode. According to a logic or metaphysics of threat versus threatened, the subject that invokes security is already under duress, already under threat. It is this threat that obliges the security measure.

Second, from an epistemological point of view the subject of security is also at a loss for knowledge, the force of its position in whatever human or technological chain of command is always deficient, always behind the ball, as they say. Insecurity emerges not from knowledge, but from the absence of knowledge. Security is mobilization for an unknown future.

Finally, the vulnerability of the subject, its precariousness in the face of the injury of others, of potential types of injuries to others, envelops the security subject as the subject of vulnerability and, as such, signals an ethics of security as an ethics of sociality.

Bibliography

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