

A RESPONSE TO SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK'S CRITICISM OF JUDITH BUTLER'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE SUBJECT



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Illustration: Stine Schwebs

The philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler have engaged in a fruitful and productive dialogue over their differing understanding of the subject. They have co-authored a book, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, and also participated in discussions on the issue (e.g. European Graduate School discussion). Both theorists draw heavily on Freudian and Lacanian theories of the subject and share a nuanced understanding of the psyche and its centrality in notions of the subject. However, despite numerous similarities they diverge on key points. Žižek's critiques of Butler's understanding of the subject can be characterised as stemming from the following:

1. Žižek's reading of Butler's concept of performativity
2. Žižek's scepticism of the privileging of identity politics and the concept of tolerance over material and economic factors.
3. Butler's reading of psychoanalytic theories in the formation of the subject
4. Butler's understanding of the Subject is ahistorical

First I shall outline Butler's main theories; I shall then deal with Žižek's criticisms in turn. In light of Žižek's criticism, the goal of this article is a defence of Butler's understanding of the subject. I shall pay particular attention to Butler's understanding of sex, gender and sexuality regarding the subject, as to fail to do so is to overlook the central thrust of her arguments and focus.

Brief Summary of Butler's Work and Influences

Judith Butler (born 1956) is Professor of Comparative Literature and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley and has a PhD in philosophy from Yale. She speaks with great authority on subject formation, discourse and the nature of being (or rather becoming). The arguments proposed within her ground-breaking book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 1990) are anti-essentialist and critical of identity categories. Centrally, Butler uncovers heteronormative, exclusionary premises in conceptualizations of the subject that are otherwise hidden. Departing from Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, Butler developed the concept of the Heterosexual Matrix, which she defines as "the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (Butler 1990:194). Her goal is to destabilise, deconstruct and denaturalise these aspects of identity. It is to reveal the violence of gender norms whereby in order for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable

gender.

Butler's Concept of the Subject

In her understanding of the subject, her premise (now a hallmark of queer theory in which she is groundbreaking) that sex, gender and desire do not necessarily cohere is central. Simply put, male does not imply masculine or attraction to woman (i.e. heterosexuality). Accordingly, sex, gender and sexuality are all unstable constructs. In her theories of the subject and subject formation, Butler is greatly interested in norms, particularly heteronormativity (whereby heterosexuality appears as natural and original and homosexuality as derivative or secondary). In this vein she denaturalises both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Compulsory repetition (which Butler terms performativity) gives the *illusion* of a stable, cohesive subject (the distinction between illusion and fact is critical to readings of Butler). Ironically, this very *performativity* admits the potential for subversion of identity through failure to repeat or mis-citation. Butler evidences and substantiates this with reference to drag (cross-dressing) whereby boundaries between the inner (often read as essence or soul) and the outer (appearance) become unclear.

1. Butler's concept of performativity

Butler asserts that performativity not only creates the illusion of naturalness, stability, a seamless heterosexual identity and a stable subject, but also provides the potential for subversion by mis-citation or faulty repetition and argues that drag demonstrates this. In drag, the (inner) "essence" of a man in drag can either be read as masculine or feminine (Butler 1990:174). Butler's point here is frequently read too literally and misunderstood. Indeed, Žižek appears to share a common misconception of Butler's theory of performativity; and the subversive potential of drag (Žižek 2000: 257, 263). Žižek appears to believe that Butler is promising drag as a prescription for subversion; moreover I believe his misunderstanding arises from his reading of *performativity* as *performance*. Such a misunderstanding was so widespread that Butler addresses this in the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble* (first edn. 1990); the release of Žižek's criticism of the subversive application of drag just one year later could have precluded his awareness of this clarification of Butler's position. As

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Butler has clarified, drag is not an example or prescription of gender subversion per se; rather it exemplifies the *potential* for gender subversion through mis-citation and failure to repeat and thus the instability of gender. Moreover, it

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performer who does the acts, no doer behind the deed". (Salih 2002: 44) The premise that the subject is an *effect* rather than a *cause* is critical to Butler's theory of performative identity (Salih 2002: 48). Žižek is sceptical of Butler's use of Nietzsche's claim (there is no doer behind the deed), along with other readers of Butler who believe this implies destruction of the subject. Although Butler questions the existence of the (category of) subject, deconstruction of the subject is quite different from destruction of the subject, and claims of nihilism (or a Nietzschean death of the subject) are unfounded here. In terms of her critique of the subject, Butler says: "to refuse to assume, that is to require a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with (or repudiating) such a notion altogether, on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction...." (Butler 1992b: 4).

Moreover, in asking after the subject, it "is not exactly where we would expect to find it- i.e. 'behind' or 'before' its deeds." (Salih 2002: 44; 45) It is important to bear in mind that Butler is critical of identity categories (a common focus in queer theory) and calls the category of the subject into question precisely through her (Foucault-inspired) critique of the subject and argumentation that it is a performative construct. (Salih 2002: 44) Accordingly, she analyses the conditions of the subject's emergence within discourse (Salih 2002: 70). We must now consider Butler's radical understanding of gender here to more fully understand this: "it is impossible to exist as a social agent outside the terms of gender" (Salih 2002: 47, own emphasis). "Man", "woman", "male" and "female" are all discursively constructed within a heterosexual matrix of power. Žižek has interpreted Butler's understanding as "too pessimistic" here as "it does not allow for the radical gesture of the thorough restructuring of the hegemonic order in its totality" (Žižek 2000: 264). Yet, it is possible to "do"

is vital to distinguish *performance* from *performativity*: the former presumes a subject, while the latter contests the very notion of the subject.

Hence the subject according to Butler is by no means an actor performing on the stage (in drag perhaps!) In fact, "there is no pre-existing

the constructions [of sex and gender] differently, despite the fact that they are currently done within the heterosexual matrix. Butler does not look to the *power structures* for the key to emancipation per se; rather her focus is on the resultant *identity categories* of the subject ("woman", "man", "male" etc.) (Salih 2002: 44). Butler reveals these to be the "effects of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffused points of origin" (Butler 1999: viii.ix, her emphasis). To stress the point, the focus of her analysis is thus how power structures (and norms) both produce and restrain categories such as "woman".

2. Identity politics and the concept of tolerance

Žižek is critical of theories that do not specifically focus on economic factors, which he contests are more pressing and pertinent than the identity politics that Butler emphasises.

According to Žižek:

...the Left has abdicated its responsibility to an economic critique, choosing instead to focus on identity politics, taking up the causes of various minority groups [here we could read homosexuals, transsexuals and so on].. I don't accept the so-called identitarian struggles of postmodern multiculturalism: gay rights, ethnic minority demands, tolerance politics and so on (Pound, Žižek Introduction, 2008: 96)

He goes on to dub these "upper-middle-class-phenomena" (ironically a charge often leveled at feminist theories such as Butler's) (Pound 2008: 96). Žižek specifies that his bone of contention here is that it "constitutes the fundamental struggle of today" rather than the model of economic globalism, which he favours (Pound 2008: 97). In line with Foucault, Butler stresses that (inherently unstable) identity categories are employed as tools for regulative regimes (Butler 1999: 301). Hence it is critical to reveal these to be unstable constructs. Moreover the norms that are brought to bear on non-normative individuals are based on flawed premises (which assume heterosexuality to be the natural origin). In terms of compulsory gender performativity, if one is out of line then they are met with ostracism, punishment and violence (Butler 1999: 7).

3. Butler's Reading of Freud, Lacan and Formation of the Subject

Neither Žižek nor Butler overlook the psyche in their conceptualization of the subject. Despite a shared influence in psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan in particular) and both theorists agreeing that the subject is formed through a set of foreclosures and repudiations, Žižek takes issue with Butler's interpretation of psychoanalytic theories in terms

of subject formation (Breen 2005: 46). He directly addresses this in a chapter entitled “Passionate (dis)attachment, or Judith Butler’s reading of Freud” in *The Ticklish Subject*. Their different understandings of the “Real” (in particular, the Lacanian application) are key here. For Žižek, the subject is located at the interface of the Symbolic and the Real (these are Lacanian terms: Lacan distinguished between the Real, the Imaginary and the symbolic- the imaginary is the realm of fantasies and unconscious images; the symbolic involves language and the next stage of infant development; the Real is that which lies beyond speech and the symbolic (Salih 2008: 83). His divergence from Butler in terms of an understanding of the Real is therefore critical. He contests that she conflates “the Real” with a non-historic symbolic norm (Hanlin 2001: 16). In order to better understand, we can turn to Butler’s encapsulation of Žižek’s theory here:

Žižek argues that “the Real is [language’s] inherent limit, the unfathomable fold which prevents it from achieving its identity within itself. Therein it consists the fundamental paradox of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real: the bar which separates them is *strictly internal to the Symbolic*”. In the explanation of this “bar”, he continues, “this is what Lacan means when he says that ‘Woman doesn’t exist’: Woman qua object is nothing but the materialization of a certain bar in the Symbolic universe... (Butler 1993: 279, emphasis in original)

It is notable that Butler is concerned with the political implications of the Real in the above statement, however, and asserts that Žižek conflates absence with difference, thereby effecting an erasure of the feminine, of woman (Breen 2005: 46-7). Regrettably space does not permit a more in-depth discussion of the details of their divergence here, except to say that Butler brings the existence of the Real into question, and emphasizes “language” as being constitutive of the body, thus diverging from Lacan and thus Žižek where it is “pleasure and pain” (Salih 2002: 84). Quite commonly, Butler and Žižek operate with subtly different terms which then have profound implications on their theory, as is the case with the Real here.

Original Homosexuality

Butler examines Freud’s postulation, and subsequent denial, of original homosexual love of the child for the parent (Butler 1999: 80). She goes on to conduct a Foucauldian appropriation of Freud’s theory of melancholia to, arguing that ego formation is founded on “primary homosexual desire” (Salih 2002: 55). Butler is critical of the privileging

of heterosexuality within psychoanalytic theory and highlights homoerotic desire in the formation of the subject (Breen 2005: 84). Moreover, heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the origin through a convincing act of repetition - indeed homosexuality is the origin, by which heterosexuality defines itself - and which lends heterosexuality the illusion of being natural or stable: it is neither. Žižek’s scepticism towards Foucault partly explains his resistance to Butler’s reading of Freud. Rather contentiously perhaps, I believe that scepticism towards propositions where homosexuality rather than heterosexuality is the original – as Butler’s radical reading of Freud implies – could feasibly be symptomatic of the very unintelligibility of proposals that indeed denaturalize and delegitimize heterosexuality (albeit along with homosexuality) and could in fact prove Butler’s point about the unintelligibility of certain non-normative subject positions (or subjects of desire) in terms of the Heterosexual Matrix. In terms of Žižek’s critique of Butler’s reading of Lacan, somewhat audaciously Butler deftly applies Žižek’s theory of “political signifiers” (which she finds very useful) in order to rebut his claims that she has misunderstood Lacan’s theories of subject formation (please refer to Breen 2005 for an in-depth account, p.47).

4. Butler’s Understanding of the Subject is Ahistorical

Žižek claims that Butler’s understanding of the subject is ahistorical (this charge has often been levelled at Butler) (Hanlin 2001: 12). One of Butler’s central premises is that the sexed and gendered subject is a construct (hence a social and historical construct). Indeed Žižek’s criticism of Butler as ahistoric appears ironic considering the enormous influence of Michel Foucault on Butler’s work (who historicized the subject in *The History of Sexuality*), whom Žižek is relatively far more distanced from and critical of. In particular, Žižek identifies what he construes as a lack of explicit consideration of material and economic aspects of the subject. However, Butler is far more preoccupied with philosophical questions and examining their premises, implications, contingencies and limitations that the premises of subject formation imply than she is with material economic concerns. As such, her focus is on “deconstructing ontological grounds” (Salih 2002: 140). Moreover, I wish to stress that the concept of performativity is founded upon temporality. Moreover, a great deal of Butler’s authorship is explicitly political, in particular she developed an explicit theoretical consideration of the historical aspects of the subject in an early work on the subject and the Gulf War in “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Subject of

Postmodernism” (Salih 2002: 139). (Butler’s authorship is so prolific and vast that works are often overlooked).

It is notable that the aims and goals of both theorists differ. Žižek explicitly asserts the importance of (global) economic factors and is somewhat dismissive of appeals to tolerance and theories of marginalization in identity politics. Butler’s goals are critical to her understanding of the subject. Butler’s explicit goals in terms of identity politics can account for the divergence with the understanding of the subject from Žižek. Butler demonstrates the limits of premises and in particular the discursive limits in order to uncover heterosexual norms that govern intelligibility and legitimacy of subjects. In short, her goals can be summarized as follows: to deconstruct the subject (to reveal it as a construct); to denaturalise the subject (by uncovering the norms that lend a gloss of the natural and thereby the legitimate to constructs), to destabilise the subject (to reveal identity to be an ongoing process). Crucially Butler asserts that “violent” norms erase the existence of individuals who do not conform to such norms. Both Žižek and Butler are politically engaged (Butler is concerned not just with the marginalization of homosexuality and transsexuality but also different ethnic groups). Indeed this raises interesting questions about the interplay between philosophy and politics and application of philosophical theories in politics and political aspects of philosophy.

Closing Remarks

Butler is not simply speaking of the subject, but more specifically, it is often the *gendered* and *sexed* subject. I have sought to demonstrate that Žižek’s claims of Butler’s shortcomings in understanding the subject overlook Butler’s formidable exposure of and attack on heteronormativity. In particular, Butler’s inspired reading of homosexual attraction in subject formation in Freud’s work (which is otherwise dismissed and explained away by Freud and subsequent interpreter of his work, including Žižek)

exemplifies such heteronormativity. Moreover, the literal interpretation of performativity *as* performance and drag *as* subversion misses the subtlety of Butler’s central tenet that drag reveals the *potential* for the subversion of the stability of the subject through mis-citation and mis-repetition. Finally, Žižek’s critique of what he perceives as a lack of solutions to certain problems in Butler’s theorization of the subject (for example in terms of material and economic issues) fails to take Butler’s mode of what at times resembles Socratic philosophical enquiry. As Butler points out in the preface to *Gender Trouble*, this is due to political concerns (in terms of the imposition of another hegemony or the establishment of norms), as well as philosophical ones, as Salih reminds us in her review of Butler’s work, “it is part of Judith Butler’s political project not to supply answers to the difficult and troubling questions she poses” (Salih 2002: 140)

In conclusion, the differences between Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek’s understanding of the subject are immensely productive and the dialogue that they have engaged in has both philosophical and political ramifications. Arguably, their different emphases are could well to be a function of their different political concerns (Žižek as an advocate of economic rights for particular ethnic groups; and Butler as an advocate of gay, lesbian and transsexual rights, along with multicultural rights). Butler destabilizes the subject, not only of feminism but of politics in general, and investigates the political meaning of the construction of the subject. As such, rather than detract from each other, readings of both philosophers enrich each other and further understanding of the subject. Butler scrutinises premises and reveals pervasive heterosexual assumptions in conceptualization, production and then restriction of the subject. By such deconstruction, she is not trying to erase or to repudiate the subject but to counter the erasure from existence of individuals who do not conform to norms of gender and desire.

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