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8-13-2018

### Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, by Judith Butler

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#### Recommended Citation

Parker, Joseph D., "Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, by Judith Butler" (2018). *Pitzer Faculty Publications and Research*. 212.

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# Women's Studies

An interdisciplinary journal

ISSN: 0049-7878 (Print) 1547-7045 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gwst20>

## *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, by Judith Butler

Harvard UP, 2015

Joe Parker

To cite this article: Joe Parker (2018) *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, by Judith Butler, *Women's Studies*, 47:5, 579-583, DOI: [10.1080/00497878.2018.1485408](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1485408)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1485408>



Published online: 13 Aug 2018.



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## BOOK REVIEW

Judith Butler. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard UP, 2015.

Judith Butler's published responses to current events continue with this new essay collection on mass popular protests. Since the early years of the twenty-first century, Butler has responded to major social movements, reflecting in *Precarious Life* (2004) on "precarity" as used in the turn of the century European global justice movement, in the co-authored *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (2007) on pro-immigration movements, in *Frames of War* (2009) on the massive global opposition to the War on Terror, and in the co-authored *Dispossession* (2013) on the European anti-austerity protests.

This collection takes as its starting point Cairo's Tahrir Square protests that toppled a major government in North Africa, together with the Gezi Park demonstrations in Turkey of 2013 and the Occupy encampments of 2011, among other mass protest movements. Several chapters from this volume were first presented as the Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College in 2010, while most others were presented on various occasions (on receiving the Adorno Prize in 2012; after the Gezi Park demonstrations in 2013) and have been previously published.

As in much of her recent work, Butler writes in an approachable manner about major issues of the day. Butler's major contributions to public discourse as an activist intellectual link queer and feminist theory to activism. This volume continues her interest in precarity: the failure of the modern nation-state to care for its people and to provide for their means of survival. Her major advance in this slim volume is in taking steps toward strategies useful to turn the vulnerability of all that makes us depend on each other into embodied, plural livable conditions for all (218).

Butler argues that mass protests call into question reigning notions of the political, installing new conditions for the political that may threaten established political order and produce important innovations (9, 18, 27). In this part to her argument Butler's volume follows Jason Frank's *Constituent Moments* (2010) in arguing for the importance of informal moments when assembled multitudes successfully produced new spaces and conditions that retroactively come to be seen as the authoritative speech of "the people." Unlike Frank, however, Butler's analysis refers even if only briefly to sites well beyond the North American limits of Frank's studies, and addresses contemporary movements rather than the historical past.

Butler indicates that collective groups in these moments perform a right not recognized by codified law, the "right to appear." This right is made possible outside of parliamentary government (15, 27) through the act of gathering together, disrupting limits to citizenship established by seemingly democratic mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. In this line of argument, she follows the insights of John Inazu's influential *Liberty's Refuge: The Forgotten Freedom of Assembly*, clarifying how assembly is a site for civic discussion, organization, and political action well beyond simple free speech and association. Unlike Inazu, however, Butler overlooks the ways that power and inequality operates within assemblies and among their organizers, a topic to which Parker and Hardt and Negri give extended attention.

Like much writing about mass protest, Butler centers her essays on the importance of acceptance as human or full citizen in the liberal public sphere (50–56). One of

her main interests is on how those who are excluded from the liberal public sphere, which in the view of Jürgen Habermas and others of the Frankfurt school is the key site for the performance of democracy, are still able to appear to lay claim to the nation-state through mass protest. In mass assemblies, then, Butler argues that the body speaks not necessarily in language but in a persistent exposure to vulnerability, performing a “right to persist” that is another uncoded right (83). In this argument Butler rereads and revises Hannah Arendt, a woman political theorist not always associated with feminism but who has been important in several of Butler’s publications since at least 2007.

In rewriting Arendt for a post-liberal age, Butler aligns with Hagar Kotef’s important revaluation in *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom* of the freedom of the liberalism of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill. Sharing Kotef’s suspicion of mechanisms, technologies, and practices put in place by the modern nation-state to moderate and manage mass mobilities, Butler finds the unruly, undisciplined masses of the assembly present a significant alternative to the liberal managerial nation-state. As Foucault argued, “discipline had to solve a number of problems for which the old economy of power was not sufficiently equipped. ... That is why discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movement ... it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways. ... [I]t must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them....agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions – anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions” (219). Yet unlike Kotef’s analysis, Butler’s historically disembodied argument is unable to address the entanglement of claims to sovereignty by both the nation-state and the assembly with settler colonialism in North America and Argentina and with neocolonial mechanisms in Cairo and Istanbul.

By shifting away from the individualism that both plagues political theory and supports the private gain enshrined in capitalism, Butler turns in a major innovation toward a consideration of embodied collective freedom and thought (9, 14–15, 18). In starting from collective protests that target governments and the nation-state, Butler challenges conceptions of collectivity and the political rooted in individualized social contracts, territorial nationalisms, and the post-Westphalian nation-state. Rather than characterizing freedom as liberation from social relations or domination, Butler instead finds mass protests and marches to be sites for the freedoms of collective bodies producing equality and interdependence. Rather than assuming collective action is compulsory, as in much nationalism and gender or other identitarian movements (42), Butler emphasizes the mass assembly as a site for the collective act of severing relations with extant regimes, such as the nation-state (9, 85), and for establishing livable conditions for all (16). In queering politics in ways that conceive of the assembly as a new site for sovereignty, Butler travels in the same intellectual landscape already cultivated by other queer theorists, such as Shannon Winnubst, to re-envision future politics.

Ultimately, Butler develops an argument in this volume for both the importance of being critical of formative categories, institutions, and structures and for establishing value and embodied practice in the world on meaningful collective terms (196, 205). In this argument Butler’s volume adds to the important criticisms by Inazu, Zick, and others of the increasingly limited and even closure of public spaces to assembly and protest not only in autocratic nations like Egypt and, increasingly, Turkey but also in the supposed bastions of democracy in North America and Europe.

Unlike most other theorists writing about democracy and popular movements, Butler emphasizes the corporeal, embodied character of mass assemblies. She

considers in two early chapters the specific ways in which her earlier notion of performativity may be embodied, linking her earlier work on performance of gender norms and sexual minorities to her more recent theme of vulnerability and precarity (26–32). Her earlier work has been criticized by Peterson and Rapaport as installing too readily the acting subject through her emphasis on the materialization of the body, and in these essays her focus on massed bodies continues that problematic line of argument. In a Foucauldian vein, Butler suggests in a later essay that the body itself is a vector of power, noting its inscription by labor, sex, gender, and race, while drawing out important general implications this character of the body has for democracy. In later essays Butler also makes the stronger argument that the body as written into difference itself brings into visibility the disavowed conditions that make the supposedly democratic public sphere possible (86).

Ultimately, for Butler, the body is even the precondition of all political claims (182). Her embodied feminist approach to politics centers on the gathered bodies of the many in large groups, the performative assembly of her title. In this aspect of her argument, Butler pursues a broadly Foucauldian line of feminist analysis, but with little engagement with other feminist political theorists such as Shapiro (2003) and Povinelli (2006) who place the body at the center of the political in their critique of the nation-state.

Butler also interrogates the specific policies she identifies as neoliberal that have reduced support networks and shredded the social safety nets of the welfare state, since those policies “dispossess the population of livable life” (208) for increasingly large sectors of national populations. The class implications of these policies are clear: as the precarity of citizens expands into the middle classes beyond the long-accepted demographic limits of poverty for the subaltern or unemployable and the colonized and indigenous, global resistance to neoliberalism has increased. As one of the few postmodern feminists developing a critique of neoliberal globalization, Butler’s essays provide important innovations useful not only for political theory but also for networked global organizing.

In engaging with democratic theory, Butler joins a legion of major postmodern theorists who have turned to reconsider democracy: Agamben, Badiou, Brown, Derrida, Keenan, Nancy, Rancière, Spivak, Ziarek, and Žižek, among others. Published in late 2015, Butler’s book joins many other meditations on the importance of popular gatherings and protests in the post-Tahrir era, and an avalanche of writing about Occupy in the United States and post-2001 Argentina. This volume also joins a considerable body of work recently published in response to European and US populist movements, including important work by Ardit, Judis, Laclau, and Povinelli. Unlike the bulk of the analysis in these several areas that for some reason remains under the captivating spell of the liberal nation-state, Butler finds the unruly masses in assembly to be hopeful signs that “the people” will reject the nation-state as the sole recourse for political decisions and action. As is the case in many recent publications, however, Butler does not engage in any detail with specific debates, and in her new volume she refers only in passing or in notes even to major published positions in these debates.

These essays are not without some weaknesses and inconsistencies. Butler’s emphasis on appearance throughout the essays gives unnecessary primacy to the public sphere that she works to displace in other parts of her argument. Her focus on temporary protest movements and encampments obscures such long-standing assembly-based communities as the Landless Worker’s Movement settlements in Brazil, the squatter social centers in Europe, and the Zapatistas in Mexico, except for two brief mentions of the several reclaimed workplaces in Buenos Aires that still stand strong (58, 81). Butler’s engagement with Eurocentric political theory and activist movements perhaps pressured her to render major social institutions, such as the nation-

state, as more stable and effective than did Foucault and several others writing political theory in a poststructuralist vein. Even as events in Tahrir Square demonstrated the instability of long-standing autocratic regimes, some will still argue that as in Gezi Square and Wall Street nothing will ever destabilize the nation-state. In these tendencies Butler's work may do less to displace the very monopoly claims by the nation-state and the so-called public sphere on the political that her arguments otherwise would.

One significant epistemic problem lurks in Butler's apparently global references to mass protests in many countries. There is very little engagement with any specificity from any of the different mass protests that she briefly mentions, so that together they become a cipher for the global and examples for her universalized argument. Such engagement would have been impossible in such a slender volume, of course, but it significantly weakens her claim that gender and sexual or other differences are central to her project. As a result Butler is unable to discuss the violent gender enforcement seen in Tahrir Square in 2011 and 2013 or the rural/urban and class differences invariably shaping participation in mass protests. Difference is erased in the global claims that these essays make, following Arendt and other European modernists, unfortunately reducing her argument to the undifferentiated totalizations that are the enemy of many queer theorists. Those who look to feminist or queer theory for inspired political strategy and theoretical insight from women of the global south or indigenous populations in the global north will not find such inspiration in this volume. Readers who take difference as central to political theory will have to wait for future Butler essays to see how difference may be more active in her theoretical thinking, even as it has been present in her activism over the past decades.

Yet precarity itself operates in a ground-breaking way at once as a category of difference and as part of Butler's universalism, as when she uses that notion to argue that all are vulnerable, rich or poor, women or men, human or not. Butler's proposals in this way avoid the weaknesses of single-group movements or single-issue events, bringing together multiple marginalized communities to build a future that does not rely on the terms used to enforce identitarian differences. In avoiding identitarian assumptions, much like Brown, Spivak, Wiegman, and some other activist feminists, Butler's work contributes to future social relations that will operate in terms unrecognizable both to the liberal nation-state and to many feminists and queers. That is what keeps some readers coming back to her work, even as it also makes demands on readers still working with and against identity-based embodiment regimes.

At stake in this book is our recognition of the profoundly limiting and deeply compromised character of normative conceptions of the political. In reading democracy as the egalitarian practice of interdependence, Butler calls for a new way of life that makes precarity livable in both embodied and plural practice (43, 217–18). Through mass assemblies, Butler argues that the gathered multitudes enact conditions that often do not yet exist for equality (201, 208). Through the shared exposure of precarity that performs political collectivity over and against the nation-state, mass assemblies displace the nation-state to perform what was once called "alliance politics," or as Butler would have it, the "queer" (70).

In rewriting possibilities for collective politics, Butler queers political theory and rejects the nation-state in its complicity with neoliberal inequality. These essays invite us to rethink our own embodied, day-to-day lives as they perform ethical social relations to construct the conditions that we may not only long for but also may bring into existence through embodied interactions. All that remains is to find ways that these emergent conditions may persist beyond temporary mass gatherings and encampments in the public square.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1485408>