

Revolutionary Parallel Pedagogy A Critical Teacher Education for the Multitude

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Post-structuralist challenges to the subject have frustrated teacher educators. This frustration has been compounded for teacher educators who are interested in using teaching to transcend systems of oppression, exploitation, and domination. This is because traditional critical teacher education has been built upon a unified, grounded, and autonomous subject. This problematic—the undoing of the modern subject—has caused many critical teacher educators to recoil and to denounce post-structuralism (or at least the poststructuralist conception of the subject) as incompatible with revolutionary politics (e.g., McLaren, 2005). There are good reasons for such denunciations. After all, much of the poststructuralist literature in education has abandoned hopes of revolutionary transformation. Rather than taking aim at relations of exploitation and domination, this literature jettisons critiques of political economy and identity oppression for the sake of “exposing” how critical education isn’t a silver bullet (e.g., Lather, 1991). Instead of calls for struggles over power we get recommendations for “microstrategies” of resistance (Ellsworth, 1989), recommendations that are surely inadequate for large-scale social change. On the one hand, then, we have critical teacher education and its modern subject and revolutionary project, and on the other hand, we have poststructuralist teacher education with its rejection of the

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modern subject and an abandonment of the revolutionary project. This is, so I wish to demonstrate, a false dichotomy. What I want to do in this article is to demonstrate how the postmodern subject—or, rather, *one form* of the postmodern subject—can form the basis of a revolutionary pedagogy, one that is oriented toward both the abolition of the capitalist mode of production *and* the overthrow of systems of domination and oppression based on identity categories and social groups. Because of the complexity and breadth of poststructuralist writing, I focus in on one particular theorist: Judith Butler.

By disputing the notion that sexuality is to gender as nature is to culture, Judith Butler essentially turned politics on its head. The idea that even sexuality, which the most radical thinkers believed to have at least a stain of nature, was socially constructed threw the (already troubled) modern subject and the political projects built upon it into a profound and irreversible crisis. It inaugurated an intense and prolonged debate within feminism and the left in general. How can we do feminism if the category ‘women’ is not stable and grounded? *How can we do revolutionary politics if we deny the subject that revolutionary politics requires?* This question, I believe, goes to the core of Butler’s philosophy.

Whereas most politics begins first from desired ends (equality, economic rights), asks what is necessary to achieve those ends (unity, mass action), and then assumes a corresponding subject or agent that is capable of enacting those necessary means, Butler begins from the end and questions the presumed cohesiveness of the subject. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler primarily interrogates the category of ‘women’ but in later works she will interrogate and uncover the fictive unity of the subject in general. Throughout her works a question will always be present: what sort of politics is possible with this subject? In this article I contend that a revolutionary teacher education—as a component of revolutionary politics—is compatible (but not necessarily identical) with this subject. I address this first by sketching Butler’s understanding of the subject and then connecting it with her political proposals. In an attempt to answer some of the questions that Butler poses I put her in a conversation with Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno. I argue that the concepts of multitude and revolutionary parallelism can enrich Butler’s project, giving it a politics and a pedagogy. Contrary to those that are repelled by Butler’s troubling of the subject, I maintain that such an inquiry is a necessary component to any radical politics. Against those who insist that the postmodern subject is incompatible with Marxism, I hope to show that this subject-politics relation is, in fact, tenable.

Subjects in Excess

An example of Butler's approach is found early in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, when Butler asks: "The insistence in advance on coalitional 'unity' as a goal assumes that solidarity, whatever the price, is a prerequisite for political action. But what sort of politics demands that kind of advance purchase on unity?" (p. 20). In keeping with Butler, I believe this question also asks "What sort of subject is required for unity?" and "What type of subject is produced by the call to unity?" Unity requires an autonomous subject, one that exists prior to and independent of sociality and has full knowledge of its content. Following from Foucault and Butler, we could say that the call to unity works to produce at least the illusion of such a subject. But what is important is that for Butler that subject is a mystification. The subject does not and cannot fully know itself. In Butler's turn towards ethics, she begins to demystify the subject that lies at the base of modernity in order to explore the potentialities that the uncovering of the autonomous subject opens up.

Before looking at the politics made possible by this demystification we should trace how Butler formulates the subject. Following Nietzsche, Butler believes that there is no "doer without the deed," there is no pre-social or "natural" self, no outside of norms. The subject is defined then, by relationality and opacity. Contrasting her position with that of the Adorno of 1963, she writes:

It is one thing to say that a subject must be able to appropriate norms, but another to say that there must be norms that prepare a place within the ontological field for the subject. In the first instance, norms are there, at an exterior distance, and the task is to find a way of appropriating them. (Butler, 2005, p. 9)

For Butler, however, norms are not exterior; they are not just "there for the taking." Instead, norms prepare a place for the subject and comprise the conditions for its appearance in the ontological field, and this is where the autonomy of the modern subject disappears. It does not follow from this that the subject is determined fully and finally by norms (which Butler has to repeatedly clarify for her critics) because norms, like subjects, are not cohesive and closed. They do not stand above society as the state does in Marxist theory. Norms operate through subjects and discourse and through that operation they are subject to reiteration and, consequently, transformation. Annika Thiem (2008) writes that it is in our encounters with others that "we continuously negotiate... norms" (p. 96).

One of the ways in which we can think about the subject's relation to norms is through struggle. "The subject is a battlefield," as Paolo Virno (2004, p. 78) says. There are struggles between norms themselves and

struggles between the subject and the norms by which they are constituted. Norms conceal as much as they reveal. They are not homogenous; they clash with one another and struggle with the outsides, or remainders, that they create. We could call this the temporal excess of norms. It is this excess, I believe, that explains *in part* the subject's partial opacity to itself because, since I can only know myself through norms that are always unfolding and conflicting, I exist in a permanent state of becoming, as Deleuze and Guattari would say. We, in turn, struggle with norms:

And when we do act and speak, we not only disclose ourselves but act on the schemes of intelligibility that govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture or revision, consolidating their norms, or contesting their hegemony. (Butler, 2005, p. 132)

This is the strange dance of the subject and the norms which render it legible, providing the language with which it can speak, the ways in which it can carry itself and, perhaps, organize politically.

The subject is also formed in relation to the other and exists in a constitutive dependency on the other. The other is *prior* to the emergence of the subject as such. This dependency should not be primarily conceived of as the infant's dependence on the parent for food and shelter because it is a permanent dependency. Using language as a metaphor and example, Butler writes that for the "I" to exist there must first be a "you" to address. Indeed, "the 'I' that I am is nothing without this 'you'...I am mired, given over, and even the word dependency cannot do the job here" (ibid., p. 82). Consequently, my life is unendingly and irretrievably bound up with yours.

It is in this context of this radical and constitutive contingency where Butler begins to use the word "human." Butler's use of the "h" word may at first seem like a relapse into categories of the modern, but it is completely consistent with her politics of resignification and reiteration. In her exchanges with Laclau and Žižek, Butler (2000) writes that, because concepts can traverse discourses "we can ask: what can the 'human' mean within a theory that is ostensibly anti-humanist?" (p. 279). We could read this as a reiteration of the normative schema of the human, for the deployment of the word is productive precisely insofar as it takes place in an antagonistic context.

Butler uses the term "human" in a way which is meant to signify the nonautonomy of the subject that is a result of its constitutive dependency on the other. Drawing on Cavarero, Butler (2005) writes that "I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no 'you' to address, then I have lost 'myself'" (p. 32). This is where the illusion of the sovereign subject

dissipates, for there is no way to assess where one ends and the other begins. It is this indeterminacy that leads Hardt and Negri (2004), in one of their evaluations of Butler, to say that “There are no queer bodies,” there is only “queer flesh” (p. 200).

My existence is dependent not only on the other in you, but also on an other in me. When Butler (2005) is writing about Hegelian recognition, she concedes that “I am, as it were, always other to myself, and there is no final moment in which my return to myself takes place” (p. 27). I posit that this constitutes in part the subject’s partial opacity to itself. It is the constant deferment of a solidified identity, of that fully-knowable illusion on which all of our modern political projects rest.

Excessive Politics

What are the implications for praxis that follow from this theory of the subject and its attendant organization? Where does this radical unknowability leave us? If the subject is not sovereign, who or what puts the action in political action? Some have accused Butler of stripping all agency from the subject (Nussbaum, 1999) and others have accused her of investing all possibility for agency in the subject (Ebert, 1995). Both of these positions result from an either/or reading of Butler, which is precisely not how she writes. Butler does not offer prescriptions for practice which frustrates those held hostage by the immediacy that politics appears to demand.

Along with Saba Mahmood (2006), I would propose that the relative autonomy of theory and praxis that Butler’s philosophy necessitates is crucial for a truly progressive politics. When theory is held captive to the demand that “we must act now,” it is dispossessed of its critical element, which is not to say that there are no instances where we must do *something now*. Butler (2000) articulates the dangers of a non-theoretical politics in her dialogue with Žižek and Laclau:

Similarly, this happens when we think we have found a point of opposition to domination, and then realize that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition. (p. 28)

Here, we see that Butler utilizes Foucault’s (1990) notion of biopower, the idea that power is decentralized and exercised through various nodes so that there is, in effect, no outside of power.¹ Hence Butler’s emphasis on reiteration, as we cannot just pull concepts and ideas out of thin air because all air is thick and already permeated with power. The acknowledgement of this paradigm of power necessitates a hypercritical politics,

and Butler offers concrete examples of certain “traps” that activists fall into by denying the complexities of power.

One broad example where Butler offers a concrete critique regards the lesbian and gay rights movement. She writes that, while the demand for the right of non-heterosexual couples to marry may seem progressive there are several harmful excesses that result from the formulation of the demand. First, the demand of marriage equality only reinforces the power of the state. Second, and more importantly, to include gay and lesbian marriage into the marital institution would “work to remarginalize others and foreclose possibilities for sexual freedom that have been long-standing goals of the movement” (*ibid.*, p. 160). Fighting to include some social arrangements within the institution of marriage is at the same time fighting to exclude and inhibit other possible social arrangements. This is one of the excesses of political action that Butler mentions in the opening pages of *Gender Trouble*, when she writes that “strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended” (p. 6). This political excess follows from the excessive subjects that animate it and it cannot be avoided. It is a risk that we must take (Butler, Benhabib, Cornell, Fraser, 1990). Perhaps Butler would even agree with Slavoj Žižek and Alan Badiou, that “one has to take the risk of fidelity to an Event, even if the Event ends up in ‘obscure disaster’” (Žižek, 2010, p. 87).

What is imperative for Butler is that the signs under which we mobilize should remain open to resignification, that the categories that we cannot do without be open to contestation, permanent questioning, endless interrogation and the process of radical democratization. We should think of these categories as “ungrounded grounds” (Butler et. al, 1990, p. 50). What does that mean, what would such a political movement look like?

Excessive Multitudes

For over a decade now, Hardt, Negri, Virno and others have been working towards defining and articulating the concept of “multitude,” which is what they see as the emerging, postmodern body politic, or really, the postmodern bodyless politic. I believe that the multitude as a political formation can give some shape to Butler’s excessive subject.

An initial way to grasp the multitude is negatively, by contrasting it with other historical body politics: the people and the masses. The people came into being with the nation-state, “The people is somewhat that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may be attributed” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 103). The social subjects that make up the

people can be different, of course, but all of these differences are secondary and subsumable under the interests of the nation-state. Hence, the people is a sovereign body. "The essence of the masses," by contrast, "is indifference: all differences are submerged and drowned in the masses" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. xiv). The differences within the masses cannot be subsumed under the nation or any other body because they are incoherent. The masses, too, in their inability to articulate difference, are homogenous.

In contrast to the people and the masses we discover what the multitude is positively.² The multitude can be thought of as "a plane of singularities, an open set of relations" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 103). Although they do not explicitly state it, we can infer that if "one action may be attributed" to the people, then the multitude, like the opaque subject, does not have a similarly strict causal relation to actions. If the multitude is not one, is not unified, how can any action be taken "in the name of the multitude?" Similarly, when the socially-constructed, partially opaque subject speaks, to whom do those words belong? When "I" speak, I am not the only one speaking, I am not using a language of my own making. I am not in complete control of what "my" words do.

The multitude is "an inconclusive constituent relation," (ibid., p. 103), which is to say that it is an assemblage of relations that are never finally solidified. We see here first a dependency, a constitutive relation to the other. The multitude contains differences that cannot be suppressed or subsumed, and difference can only be established in relation to the other. Second, we see the openness of the relation. The multitude, like Butler's subject, is always in a state of becoming.

Virno conceives of the movement of the multitude as a defection, a desertion. But a desertion to where? Certainly not to somewhere "outside" because, as we have already said, there is no outside of power. This exodus is really a reconfiguration.³ One example that Virno offers is civil disobedience. But it is not a liberal civil disobedience which, much like Butler's concern for the gay and lesbian movement, by appealing to the state "signal[s] only a deeper loyalty to state control" (Virno, 2004, p. 69). It is a radical civil disobedience that bypasses demands on the state. This is important for our discussion here because many of Butler's political critiques attack this reliance on the state. We have already seen one example. Another is her discussion of the 2006 Dutch Civic Integration Examination, a required test for immigrants that supposedly gauged the potential immigrant's tolerance towards sexual minorities by showing images of two men kissing. The latent purpose of the examination is to restrict immigration by harassing religious minorities. "What happens," Butler asks, "when seeking recourse to the protective actions of the state

in turn augments and fortifies the state's own power, including its power to articulate a racist national identity?" (Butler, Asad, Brown & Mahmood, 2009, p. 130). Virno (2004) answers the problem with desertion, or defection: "Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place... rather than facing the problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives" (p. 70). Put another way in another essay: "to desert means to modify the conditions within which the conflict is played instead of submitting to them" (Virno & Ricciardi, 2005, p. 20).

I read Butler's notion of performativity and her discussion of the national anthem with Gayatri Spivak (2007) to be similar to Virno's proposal of desertion. During the upsurge of the immigrant rights movement in 2006 there were massive street protests throughout the U.S. and protesters began singing the national anthem in Spanish. Butler writes that "The emergence of 'nuestro himno' introduced the interesting problem of the plurality of the nation, of the 'we' and the 'our:' to whom does this anthem belong?" (Butler & Spivak, 2007, p. 58). Here we see how the homogeneity of the nation-state (and consequently, the people) is performatively constituted, how the nation is brought into being as homogenous through the singing of the national anthem in English. The singing of the national anthem in Spanish was a subversive reiteration that calls into question the very foundation of the nation. It was not an appeal to the nation-state to change its configuration (although demands for citizenship for all were made), it challenged the state by subverting its supposedly natural basis and origin. Butler also talks about how the singing of the anthem in Spanish took place on the street:

At this point, the song can be understood not only as the freedom of expression or the longing for enfranchisement—though it is, clearly, both those things—but also as *restaging the street*, enacting freedom precisely when and where it is explicitly prohibited by law. (ibid., p. 63, emphasis added)

Furthermore, as a modification of the conditions of struggle, the demand is made "precisely in defiance of the law by which recognition is demanded" (ibid., p. 64). In other words, it is not an appeal to the reason of the state on behalf of a "deeper loyalty to state control," but a defection from state control. Indeed, after the national anthem is sung in Spanish, Butler asks, "is it still an anthem to the nation and can it actually help undo nationalism?" (ibid., p. 69). Can the reiteration of the national anthem produce an exodus from state power?

Revolutionary Parallelism and Excessive Subjects

Running throughout the political projects of Butler, Hardt, Negri, and

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Virno is the question of belonging. This is their opposition to the nation, that it is a political project based on exclusion, and exclusion marginalizes and renders some bodies unintelligible. But isn't all identity based on exclusion? And isn't there a double movement in identity politics that results in a paradox, for the process whereby identity is utilized to expose how certain groups of subjects are oppressed works simultaneously to naturalize and consequently immobilize those same groups and, as in the marriage equality example above, works to exclude and marginalize other groups? Butler (2006) articulates and affirms this paradox while at the same time stating explicitly that we can't do politics without identity. She attempts to resolve this conflict by stating that identity must be thought of as open-ended, an identity-of-difference. "[I]f feminism presupposes that 'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability" (Butler et. al, 1990, p. 51). Again, what can that look like? Hardt and Negri's (2009) theory of revolutionary parallelism, I believe, offers us a more comprehensive way out of this paradox. It both elucidates and strengthens Butler's political critique by offering a methodology that is not prescriptive but still offers directions for political action.

For Hardt and Negri, there are three principle tasks for revolutionary politics that begin but do not end with identity. First, they write, it is necessary to mobilize around identity in order to render hierarchy and its attendant marginalization visible. The second task is the struggle for freedom. They state explicitly that this is not the freedom to be "who you really are," but rather to see "what you can become" (ibid., p. 331). The third task, where they cite Butler and other queer theorists, is the "self-abolition of identity." It is essential to stress that these three tasks are not sequential or even separable:

Without the first two, pursuing the third task—abolishing identity—is naïve and risks making existing hierarchies more difficult to challenge. But without the third task, the first two remain tethered to identity formations, unable to embark on a process of liberation. (ibid., p. 337)

I believe that the logic of revolutionary parallelism is congruous with Butler's politics because, while she argues for the subversion of identity, in *Contingent Foundations*, she writes that "Within feminism, it seems as if there is some political necessity to speak as and for women, and I would not contest that necessity" (p. 49). These two simultaneous positions correspond to the first two tasks of revolutionary parallelism, but what would Butler make of the third task, the abolition of identity?

Before proceeding it is necessary to clarify that, at this point in

their argument our authors propose that we refer not to identity but to singularity which, they argue, is not a concept but a process. Consequently, by referring to singularity we do not get stuck in the immobility of identity that I referred to above. There is a rich history of thought surrounding singularity spanning from Spinoza to Deleuze, and it is not within the scope of this paper to thoroughly explore this history. In general, however, when we speak of singularity we are attempting to think of difference in itself, different subjects that remain dependent on the other for recognition and constitution but not for definition. According to Giorgio Agamben (1993), a companion of the thinkers I have drawn from, singularity is "*such as it is*," (p. 1); it is neither particular nor universal, neither ineffable nor intelligible. Congruous with Butler's opaque subject, singular subjects are "always more than the sum of their abstract predicates," (Durantaye, 2009, p. 162), predicates here refer to identity categories, or the norms through which I can know "myself."

For Hardt and Negri specifically, singularity has three characteristics. First, each singularity exists only in its relation with other singularities. Second, each singularity has a "multiplicity within itself" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 338) and third, each singularity is open and "engaged in a process of becoming different" (ibid., p. 339). To review Butler's conception of the subject in an order that correlates with the three characteristics listed above, we could say that (1) the subject exists only because of and in relation to the other, (2) the subject always has an internal alterity (and partial opacity), and (3) the subject is never fully or finally determined. It should be easy to see that Butler has been talking about something very similar to Hardt and Negri's conception of singularity all along.

Now that we have done a brief survey of singularity, we can return to the question at hand: what would Butler make of the abolition of identity? As a reflex, I would propose that the project, or at the very least the phraseology, is too bold. There is a certainty here that does not mix well with Butler's politics. Or maybe it's that Butler would be more concerned with what the project forecloses upon, what its phrasing hides. Then again, what is meant by the abolition of identity?

Drawing on the communist tradition, Hardt and Negri (2009) offer the proletarian struggle as an example: "The proletariat is the first truly revolutionary class in human history, according to this tradition, insofar as it is bent on its own abolition as a class" (p. 332). The proletarian identity is defined by the subject's relation to the means of production, namely their dispossession of them. To say that the proletariat has as its aim its own destruction is not to say that it seeks to abolish the means of production. Thinking into the future (and we can hear Butler's objections to this move), it does not mean that there will be no more

means of production but that private property will be abolished and as a consequence the subject will no longer be defined by its relation to the means of production. Similarly, we would say that the self-abolition of the “homosexual” or “heterosexual” identity will not imply that there will be no same- or opposite-sex relations, but that the destruction of the definitional categories and the sex-gender binary will open our eyes to other possible sexual arrangements. This sounds strikingly similar to the moment when, in *Precarious Life*, Butler proposes “an insurrection at the level of ontology” (as cited in Chambers, 2007, p. 59).

I would submit that while there are many commonalities between Butler’s politics and the third task of revolutionary parallelism, Butler’s politics lack the clarity to fully support the project. I do not mean to call Butler’s politics weak; after all, who said that it is Butler’s responsibility to offer a path to liberation? I maintain that Butler’s persistent questioning of what possibilities are foreclosed by certain proposals serves as a much needed check on critical teacher education.

Conclusion

The crisis of the modern subject should be cause for militant theoretical inquiry, not a retreat into modernist frameworks, and it is in this vein that left intellectuals like Judith Butler, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri must be engaged and taken seriously. These theorists offer not only critiques of the subject but each, in turn, asks *what is made possible* by such a critique. How can acknowledging the subject as opaque, nonsovereign, and contingent prevent us from repeating past mistakes? How can it inform the way in which we organize? How does the theoretical knowledge of the fundamental instability of identity help us to formulate concrete political demands?

While Butler’s interrogation of the subject is surely productive, the concept of multitude offers a way to begin to grasp how that subject can be organized politically and the theory of revolutionary parallelism offers a complementary methodological approach that can be carried out on the basis of that inquiry. As the multitude is educated and as we engage in defection and desertion from state power, however, we can only hope to have Butler whispering in our ear: “What potential social arrangements are we precluding? Whose lives are we making unlivable? What excesses are we not seeing?”

Notes

¹ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno all utilize Foucault’s notion of biopower, although each uses the term in a nuanced way. Negri (2008),

for example, writes that “For those of us thinking in their wake, biopolitics is not a return to origins, a way to ground thinking back in nature. It is rather the attempt to construct thinking from ways of life... to make thinking (and reflection on the world) spark from artificiality—understood as the refusal of all natural foundations—and the power (puissance) of subjectivation” (p. 34).

² I should immediately note that there is an expanding amount of literature on the multitude of which I can only cover a little, and one might accuse me here of only selecting portions which fit the project at hand.

³ Negri (2008) writes that “Our world is too heavy to blast at once. It is too complex for us to dream of a Winter Palace to conquer. So *we must leave, and construct new forms of life*, new articulations and novel trajectories within the social field” (p. 101).

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