



**The melancholical society and the new strategies of
communication as a movable, growing, live perspective of
reinvention:
the project of New Gender Anthropology by Judith Butler**

A sociedade melancólica e as novas estratégias de comunicação
como uma perspectiva móvel, crescente e viva de reinvenção:
o projeto da Nova Antropologia de Gênero de Judith Butler

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Abstract

Judith Butler's feminism is a critical position, formed as a result of overlapping of several traditions in the sphere of classical knowledge: philosophy (Spinoza's ethics, dialectical phenomenology by Hegel-Kozheve, Foucault's concept of subjectivity, Altusser's theory of interpellation, Derrida's post-structuralism), psychoanalysis and the criticism of the classical feminist theory. Butler is a current critic of the Western Culture, namely capitalism. The capitalist society itself as a stronghold of normativeness is a target for Butler's criticism, and gender is place from which it is possible to speak and carry out resistance activities in the conditions of domination of the discourses of power. She offers us a project of new gender anthropology through the concept of an ecstatic melancholic society wich you can be visible to the other/Other, but remain in radical blindness in regard to self.

Keywords – Judith Butler; feminism; gender.

Resumo

O feminismo de Judith Butler é uma posição crítica, formada como resultado da sobreposição de várias tradições na esfera do conhecimento clássico: a filosofia (a ética de Spinoza, a fenomenologia dialética de Hegel-Kozheve, o conceito da subjetividade de Foucault, a teoria da interpelação de Altusser, o pós-estruturalismo de Derrida), a psicanálise e a crítica da clássica teoria feminista. Butler é uma crítica atual da cultura ocidental, isto é, o capitalismo. A própria sociedade capitalista como um reduto de normatividade é alvo de críticas de Butler, e gênero é o lugar do qual é possível falar e realizar atividades de resistência em condições de dominação dos discursos de poder. Ela nos oferece um projeto de uma nova antropologia do gênero através do conceito de uma sociedade em êxtase melancólico que você pode ser visível a, outro/Outro, mas permanecem em cegueira radical em relação a si mesmo.

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Palavras-chave - Judith Butler; feminismo; gênero.

Once Monique Wittig was asked
if she had a vagina, and she said, "No!"
(*information from a lecture Vassar College*).

If one has ever been beaten within an inch of life, she/he knows what it means. If anyone has been thrown sulfuric acid on, she/he would probably not survive it twice. If one should once start to bruise gender's social face, it would be hard to stop, as one may find her-/himself as subject in process, if we use Kristeva's term: the agent/doer, who doesn't exist either "before" or "after", or "during" the action. But if this is "gender's face", we may need it just this way today – never fixing in time, deprived of the essential anthropological characteristics, distinctness, differences, sex, race, of any "natural" form? And then one would have to beat until the face will be no more, until it starts becoming indistinguishable.

It seems to me, this is the position of the actual Western feminism nowadays. Can we speak about aggression here? On one compulsory condition, that this is aggression turned against oneself.

Judith Butler's feminism is a critical position, formed as a result of overlapping of several traditions in the sphere of classical knowledge: philosophy (Spinoza's ethics, dialectical phenomenology by Hegel-Kozhve, Foucault's concept of subjectivity, Althusser's theory of interpellation, Derrida's post-structuralism), psychoanalysis and the criticism of the classical feminist theory. Nevertheless, the desire to label Butler as belonging to a certain trend would be, in a sense, a betrayal of the meaning of her creative activities, an authoritative act of appropriation. for Butler incarnates rather the phenomenological – dialectical analytics of the missing subjectivity. not to be that, which is, and to be that, which is not. If we should ask ourselves the question "Where Judith





Butler is?"', we would come to know that she will always find herself where you don't expect to find her, and the one you do not assume to think of.

Is Butler's gender theory developing a new political anthropology? Problematizing the notions of recognition, norm, performance, the "acceptable" life as viability, power, violence, freedom, identity, Butler is bringing the category of "human" into question: for the opportunity itself of asking the question "Who?", according to Butler, signalizes, that the notion "human" has already more than exceeded any definitions. Rethinking of fixed values and conditions of belonging to "the human" through consolidation of scientists and activists in understanding such problems as: the structure of kinship (new ideas of "maternity" and "fatherhood", hetero- and homosexual passionate attachment), lesbo/gay marriages (sperm and ovum are not parents), access to reproductive technologies (surgical intervention into the body, plastic gender reassignment surgeries, the silicone revolution), desire for recognition as steadfastness, the fight for rights and freedoms as the effect of corporal vulnerability, the problem of the Other as taking pleasure (for example, a terrorist) and the aggression, connected with it, on penalty of a permanent threat to life lead Butler to a radical reconsideration of feminism and the gender theory.

The Past Body of Feminism

In her work *Undoing Gender* Butler states that feminism doesn't have the past: the narration of feminism does not comply with rendering, as none of feminism stories refers to the past. Another reason why there is no common history of Feminism is because we deal with multiplicity. Moreover, the stories of feminism keep coming true simultaneously on the crossroads of our accounts of them. The often actualize, taking shape, which never exhaust the essence. In other words only a loss (for example, a story, which we, feminists, cannot recollect, because, according to Butler, "our" bodies do not belong to us, as they





are not totally “ours”) functions as the necessary condition of narration; it is from the point of impossible loss that it is possible to think of feminism as being the body of “the psychic life of power”. It is the mental apparatus, Butler thinks, that forces feminism and its stories to “work”.

If we refer to Freud's work “Replacement” (1915) and recollect, that the first-replaced always turn out to be the sources of desire causing irritation and displeasure, that is the representations connected with non-erogenous zones of the body, we can obviously speak about imperious differentiation between the spheres of pleasure and of displeasure, included into the body in such a way, while the latter is called to take pleasure. The body of the repressed subject in such case appears quite functional - taking pleasure through the loss of superfluous pleasure which is experienced by all its whole surface as orgasmic affect. Such pleasure is functioning as impossible, as its experience has fatal nature. It is Butler's notion of «the psychic life of power» which describes the power which makes normativeness as getting pleasure and avoiding displeasure as unconscious life strategies.

If the design of production of corporality as the effect of primal repression should be applied to the body of feminisms which cannot be grasped in a story, symbolised and archived in factuality, I wonder if we will find out then, that this body has been satiated with its normative erogeneity found itself in the situation when the habitual ways of receiving pleasure do not satisfy it any longer, and the pleasure itself as a goal has lost its meaning? Could we assert that feminisms as a story, created here-and-now, not having the uniform version of origin, for the sake of simplification makes up primal causes which they cannot remember and know, in the same way as they cannot remember their primarily repressed? Feminism is simultaneously more and less than what it is – there is just as much of it as the number of stories about it that we can tell. Besides, because the primarily repressed is accidental, repetition as a reconstruction of an accident in the





process of storization is impossible. Can we assume, that feminisms, seeking storization, in reality seek to know the limits of their recognition, thus testing the limits of authoritative knowledge under the conditions of an absent addressee as a supposed place of a listener? Only in such a situation is there an opportunity of reconstructing the past.

What is the story of feminism, told by Judith Butler? In the book *Undoing Gender* Butler says, that there is no such story, which would tell us about the development of feminism, for example, queer, and then trans-inter-gender theory, as in any of these stories "there is no logically necessary reason for identification". In the book "Gender Trouble" she develops her idea in more details through revealing the contradictive nature of the notions politics and representation. The political and linguistic representations are the norms of conformity, which are already always connected with the notion of the subject. As a result there occurs a political problem: "a woman" as the object of feminist research is an imperious discursive formation of representation politics. We are dealing with the situation when feminism is emancipating a discursive "miscarriage" - "a woman" as an artificially created notion in the political system. Then certain questions arise: what kind of emancipation are we speaking about and what do we actually fight for? The notion of a "woman" as a legitimized discursive miscarriage in the practices of political representations functions through the act of exclusion as concealment, which points to the absence of a woman where her presence is assumed. The notion of "a woman" itself cannot perform the function of the stable signifier, and there are no stable signifiers: for the chains of signifiers are a movable metonymical gliding, void of any certainty, which is the reason for Butler's gender anxiety. Therefore Butler formulates the paradoxical: when trying to speak about women's issues, feminism "is speaking out" men's issues. As a result we have a peculiar feminism "on the lee", which under the mask of defending women's rights has designed a theory of patriarchal supremacy, from which it derived the universal experience of female submission, which is necessary to fight against.





I cannot continue to retell Butler's stories of feminism before I express one complaint concerning not only the criticism of patriarchy, but also concerning the criticism of phallogocentrism as a mythic construction, which feminisms try to argue with. It is this construction which shows that feminism is constituted in the situation of the necessity of creating of an external enemy who must be exposed, accused, criticized and, by using his own notions, rudely profiteer on them. It has long been known, that Phallus does not exist², Phallus is that which occurs between people, it functions as a way of my belonging to the other ; it is not important what kind of me to what kind of the other , or may be to the others; at the same time I am never me, we just mean each other in the situation here and now. And still I would like to give tribute to two representatives of queer theory, Teresa de Lauretis and Elizabeth Grosz, because to my mind through their criticism of psychoanalysis they just utter its essence. For it is only speaking from the place of ignorance which makes psychoanalysis possible. Therefore Teresa de Lauretis and Elizabeth Grosz are representatives of the most up to date feminism today, the feminism which doesn't know itself. I can only repeat Butler's idea that "the story" of feminism is always stories here-and now, told as possible interpretations and understanding, but never laying claim to completeness, structuredness and ultimate expressedness. Rather gender theory speaks about itself through stories of feminisms without realizing it.³

Insanity of Gender

Butler is a current critic of the Western Culture, namely capitalism. The capitalist society itself as a stronghold of normativeness is a target for Butler's criticism, and gender is place from which it is possible to speak and carry out resistance activities in the

² Irina Zherebkina., Phallus does not exist., St.-P., 2003., P. 252.

³ Judith Butler. Giving an Account of Oneself (H.: Gende Studies, №17 (1/2008)), pp.104-119





conditions of domination of the discourses of power. Jacques Lacan in his 17th seminar “The Opposite Side of Psychoanalysis” tells us about Discourse without speech, pointing to the fact that discourse is retained in a “certain kind of stable relationships”⁴. Continuing Lacan’s idea, Butler in her book *Undoing Gender* points to the fact that imperious discourse in its various manifestations represents false forms of universalism, serving the silent cultural imperialism. Discourse can be understood as a means of one subject’s being introduced to another subject, thus setting up social bonds of intersubject relationship. In his 17th seminar (1969-1970) Lacan analyses 4 types of discourses - Master, University, Hysteric and Analyst. A little later, in 1972, when speaking at the University of Milan Lacan speaks about Capitalist discourse. All these discourses are some kind of social matrixes, where the place of the split subject (\$) is pre-assigned by the structure itself. Meanwhile, a discourse still turns out to be movable, for it functions at the expense of empty space, which turns into a hole, into which the subject unfailingly falls, when he finds himself in this space. Thus a discourse is an open system, and the subject finds himself as a subject in process, that is as a place through which this or that discourse is presented/performed. As a result, the subject, being a representative of this or that discourse, turns out to be an agent, that is the one who is acting under compulsion. The status of an agent points to the fact that he is double, and this in the best case.

Through analysis and thematization of discourses Lacan exposes the mechanisms of the work of power, showing how power is designed. Decisive here is the proposition about power as about “empty space”, occupied by a psychoanalyst, in respect to whom a transfer as the practice of love, as the mentality of power turns out to be possible. Is it from this “empty space” that Lacan speaks in the 17th seminar, taking a detached view of himself? But what kind of view is it, which can show you, the view outside of self?

⁴ Jacques Lacan. *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. (M.: Gnosis/Logos, 2008), p. 9





One can try to find answers to these questions in Butler's gender theory. But to do this I suggest rejecting the position, allowing us to "grasp" the truth of "gender", to look into what gender is and the like. But to proceed from the assumption that gender exists in order to display/clear up questions of politics, culture, arts, scientific knowledge. That is it is not gender which is a problem in politics, but politics is a problem for gender, it is not gender which is a problem, let us say, in biology, but biology is a problem for gender, it is not gender which is a problem in sociology/psychology/history, but sociology/psychology/history and other social sciences are a problem for gender. In this context gender, to my mind, is called to expose *the imaginary function of domination*, which "creates subjects out of all of us". And here I would like to recall Lacan's mirror stage, which paradox consists in that a child identifies her-/himself as the other: only through the act of identification with the other do the feelings of self-control, abiding in the self and finding one's place develop. I exist on the symbolical imaginary crossroads only if I am acknowledged by Another: only if I am labeled, marked, identified am I included in the social practice, that is I live. But the situation of recognition turns out to be imaginary, because that very another/Another, in whose eyes recognition "is found" is I myself. And the only recognition possible is the recognition of another/Another in the self as one who is visible and audible. In my opinion this is the place of gender – the place of abiding already always "outside of self", outside of symbolical imaginary Domination. Only this way, in my opinion, can the machine of recognition be stopped.

In her work *Undoing Gender* Butler, reflecting on ecstasy, writes about the abilities of an ecstatic gender society. Gender, according to her, suggests the situation of being always outside of the self, the signifier, that there is no originally prespecified "self" (*oneself*). There are only "us" (ourselves), living outside of ourselves. And here I would like to use a special Butler's notion – "insanity", meaning only that we impute nothing to each other. In this sense "we" are lost for each other: the only thing that bonds us is the feeling





of loss, that is melancholy, which is invisible. And it is in the place of melancholy, that it is possible to leave the imaginary "ego" (*moi*) and the symbolical "ego" (*je*) and to be "us". Only here does the function of recognition finally "not work": in melancholy "we" don't want to be visible as "I". It is not by chance that Freud's *trauer* in the title of his famous work "Mourning and Melancholia" is translated as "mourning", and not as "sorrow", for example: while melancholy is invisible, mourning is always staged.

What does Butler mean by telling us about the non-imposed melancholic "us" as of a possible gender society? She believes that it is from this place that the establishing of social normativity/power can become visible: as gender performance, as playing manliness and femininity in the public articulation of sexual identity. Because gender is performing only in the framework of masculine and feminine: even a transvestite is always a disguised man/woman, parodying a woman/a man. Performing is a well-organized set of actions in the binary structure of woman/man, which is repeated in its uniformity. Transvestites only repeat the same logic in a comic form, showing the existing absurdity of sociality to the sociality itself; this is a corporal masquerade embodiment of the structure of binary gender, which perceives the social as a show, not seeing self in it. Thus, the place of transvestites is generally in the sphere of the private – lesbo/gay clubs, private parties, including "oligarchical" ones.

About humans and their rights

How does Butler define the place of a human and the human in this context? A human, according to her, is the one, who has rights or is struggling to have rights. Autonomy, security, protection of rights and freedoms are connected in Butler's works with representation of the body in the social space in the situation when the body is already always "displayed" to the other in its vulnerability, uncovering the possibility of violence on the part of the other and testifying to danger to life. To be a body means





exactly to be given to the other, that's why autonomy turns out to be so necessary. A body is a public phenomenon, which belongs and doesn't belong to the subject simultaneously, being partly lost in its vulnerability, and thus dressed in mourning. The paradox for Butler consists in that the body is "displayed" in its vulnerability to the other before any "ego", that is before a human. The norm in this situation is not just a desire to be acknowledged, but to be acknowledged as a humanizing desire: the recognition itself is functioning as a humanizing desire, which is cashed in on by all the power institutions. This is the worst thing to be desired, as the desire itself of being acknowledged as the desire for desire is a non-feasible project.

In her book *Undoing Gender*, keeping in mind the Hegel-Kojeve's concept of recognition (desire is a desire for desire) and Lacan's ethical maxim (persist, do not betray your desire, which is the desire of the Other) Butler produces a hybrid political argument: desire is the desire of preserving oneself, persisting in being as the one called, dictated by normativity, which excludes the possibility of existing of the ecstatic outside-of-self being. The desire to preserve oneself, persist in being – that's what, according to Butler, the struggle for rights is. That's why to struggle for human rights is to do one's best to "present oneself" as a human. And when someone is fighting, for example, for sexual rights, here it does not refer to the rights connected with our desire: we are speaking about the norms in the context of which and in accordance with which individuality is realized. As a result, the discourse about rights is an open statement of dependence from the other/Other. It is for this reason that Butler criticizes lesbo/gay/trans/women's movements, coming out for the freedom of rights: in her opinion, positioning themselves as practitioners of resistance to the power normatives, they struggle for writing themselves into the structure, for an impossible and unnecessary recognition.

The norm here turns out to be gender, when the institutionalized gender turns out to be a naturalized realization of sex (gender). But if my desires are loathsome and





sickening, Butler writes, it is a direct evidence to the fact that I have never chosen the social world, which constitutes me. And a possibility of my action in this world proceeds from a paradox of discrepancy between what I am and what I must be. Only being a doer in the process of life in constant discrepancy with preset limits does the subject act. And if “ego” finds itself already always in the situation of being constituted by and dependent on the norms, but meanwhile is trying to live according to the ways, which maintain critical and transforming influence on them, then life itself, the very way of life are possible as a critical action.

The main paradox, pointed out by Butler here is that the attitudes initiating the acts of awarding “humanness” simultaneously deprive other people of the possibility of achieving this status, differentiating between a human and less-than-human. Here we also come across paradoxes of oppressed minorities: ^{IV} because being acknowledged means having certainty – racial, class, sexual, gender, etc. As a result the patterns of recognition destroy the one, who has been recognized, but also destroy the one, who has been rejected this recognition. It is recognition which turns out to be the place of power in Butler's works, from which distinction is made between the human and less-than-human. It means that in the same degree to which desire is engaged into the social normativity, to that same degree is it connected with the issue of power as recognition of “the human” in a human or rejection of this recognition because of impossibility of normative identification.

So Butler asks the following questions: having come to a decision about gender, will I be identified with the notion “a human”? Or, maybe, the notion “a human” will grow so much, that there will appear an opportunity to get included into it? If I start desiring a certain way will I be able to live? Will there be place for *my* life or will I be recognized/seen in my being in relation to the one, on whom I depend, that is the other/Other?





When answering this question Butler offers us a project of new gender anthropology through the concept of an ecstatic melancholic society. She criticizes the process of identification as a reflexive action: you reacquire your own idealized image in an infinite number of identifications, for you cannot realize its initial loss, put up with a possibility of living in the situation of not possessing it. Through appropriation as an imaginary possession of the image, you can be visible to the other/Other, but remain in radical blindness in regard to self. In such a role gender serves the production of symptomatic bodiness. Thus in the book *Undoing Gender* Butler writes about the fact that problematization of gender's place is possible only in the involvement with the phenomenon of melancholy, which is viewed not as a phenomenon of culture, connected with unacknowledged loss, but as a place of recognition of loss, from which you can see the work of power mechanisms, and speech, action and image become possible. It is melancholy, Butler considers, that "ejects" us from our own bodies and makes us involved in the ecstatic being outside of self as a consistency of "us". Meanwhile the melancholic "us" is "us" loss as a stable commonality and unity: This is not the kind of "us" we are used to knowing. From the place of a melancholic gender society as abiding outside of self it is seen that there is neither self, nor me, but there is only "us", lost to each other, but it is belonging to the loss which creates community of all of us. And Gender Theory is definitely called to show and problematize the initial non-belonging to self, the permanent process of the loss of self as an impossible saving identification. Gender theory is able to teach us to live in the constant situation of the loss, and not to suffer from it. To realize self as lost means to understand that possessing is impossible. Non-possession of self just creates the attitude of "non-involvement" in relationships with the other, for if we don't seek to possess others, to possess their desires, we don't seek recognition, don't have the desire to «impute» something to the other and don't wish "to be imputed" something by the other. Thus, Butler's melancholic society assumes development of new strategies of





communication through a different interpretation of a human as a movable, growing, live perspective of reinvention. This is not a place of total indifference to everything, but, on the contrary, a point of ultimate concentration, action and life in the condition of here-and-now. The subject is not driven into the totalitarian framework of the act of utterance, which always limits the movement of speech: for only in the process of loss, outside of self does an opportunity to hold a speech, act, create and live display itself. This is the place, where gender is constantly reinvented, which gives an opportunity to deploy new strategies of political demands, which proceed from places of being deprived of the rights of property and possession, but not from *one's own person*.

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