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INTERNATIONAL 22 SEPTEMBER 2020

Judith Butler on the culture wars, JK Rowling and living in “anti-intellectual times”

The philosopher and gender theorist discusses tensions in the feminist movement over trans rights.



BY ALONA FERBER

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Thirty years ago, the philosopher Judith Butler*, now 64, published a book that revolutionised popular attitudes on gender. *Gender Trouble*, the work she is perhaps best known for, introduced ideas of gender as performance. It asked how we define “the category of women” and, as a consequence, who it is that feminism purports to fight for. Today, it is a foundational text on any gender studies reading list, and its arguments have long crossed over from the academy to popular culture.

In the three decades since *Gender Trouble* was published, the world has changed beyond recognition. In 2014, *TIME* declared a “**Transgender Tipping Point**”. Butler herself has moved on from that earlier work, writing widely on culture and politics. But disagreements over biological essentialism remain, as evidenced by the tensions over trans rights within the feminist movement.

How does Butler, who is Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature at Berkeley, see this debate today? And does she see a way to break the impasse? Butler recently exchanged emails with the *New Statesman* about this issue. The exchange has been edited.

Alona Ferber: In *Gender Trouble*, you wrote that “contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism”. How far do ideas you explored in that book 30 years ago help explain how the trans rights debate has moved into mainstream culture and politics?

Judith Butler: I want to first question whether trans-exclusionary feminists are really the same as mainstream feminists. If you are right to identify the one with the other, then a feminist position opposing transphobia is a marginal position. I think this may be wrong. My

movement that is seeking to speak in the name of the mainstream, and that our responsibility is to refuse to let that happen.

AF: One example of mainstream public discourse on this issue in the UK is the argument about allowing people to self-identify in terms of their gender. In an open letter she published in June, JK Rowling articulated the concern that this would "throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman", potentially putting women at risk of violence.

JB: If we look closely at the example that you characterise as "mainstream" we can see that a domain of fantasy is at work, one which reflects more about the feminist who has such a fear than any actually existing situation in trans life. The feminist who holds such a view presumes that the penis does define the person, and that anyone with a penis would identify as a woman for the purposes of entering such changing rooms and posing a threat to the women inside. It assumes that the penis is the threat, or that any person who has a penis who identifies as a woman is engaging in a base, deceitful, and harmful form of disguise. This is a rich fantasy, and one that comes from powerful fears, but it does not describe a social reality. Trans women are often discriminated against in men's bathrooms, and their modes of self-identification are ways of describing a lived reality, one that cannot be captured or regulated by the fantasies brought to bear upon them. The fact that such fantasies pass as public argument is itself cause for worry.

AF: I want to challenge you on the term "terf", or trans-exclusionary radical feminist, which some people see as a slur.

JB: I am not aware that *terf* is used as a slur. I wonder what name self-declared feminists who wish to exclude trans women from women's spaces would be called? If they do favour exclusion, why not call them exclusionary? If they understand themselves as belonging to that strain of radical feminism that opposes gender reassignment, why not call them radical feminists? My only regret is that there was a movement of radical sexual freedom that once travelled under the name of radical feminism, but it has sadly morphed into a campaign to pathologise trans and gender non-conforming peoples. My sense is that we have to renew the feminist commitment to gender equality and gender freedom in order to affirm the complexity of gendered lives as they are currently being lived

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AF: The consensus among progressives seems to be that feminists who are on JK Rowling's side of the argument are on the wrong side of history. Is this fair, or is there any merit in their arguments?

JB: Let us be clear that the debate here is not between feminists and trans activists. There are trans-affirmative feminists, and many trans people are also committed feminists. So one clear problem is the framing that acts as if the debate is between feminists and trans people. It is not. One reason to militate against this framing is because trans activism is linked to queer activism and to feminist legacies that remain very alive today. Feminism has always been committed to the proposition that the social meanings of what it is to be a man or a woman are not yet settled. We tell histories about what it meant to be a woman at a certain time and place, and we track the transformation of those categories over time.

We depend on gender as a historical category, and that means we do not yet know all the ways it may come to signify, and we are open to new understandings of its social meanings. It would be a disaster for feminism to return either to a strictly biological understanding of gender or to reduce social conduct to a body part or to impose fearful fantasies, their own anxieties, on trans women... Their abiding and very real sense of gender ought to be recognised socially and publicly as a relatively simple matter of according another human dignity. The trans-exclusionary radical feminist position attacks the dignity of trans people.

AF: In *Gender Trouble* you asked whether, by seeking to represent a particular idea of women, feminists participate in the same dynamics of oppression and heteronormativity that they are trying to shift. In the light of the bitter arguments playing out within feminism now, does the same still apply?

JB: As I remember the argument in *Gender Trouble* (written more than 30 years ago), the point was rather different. First, one does not have to be a woman to be a feminist, and we should not confuse the categories. Men who are feminists, non-binary and trans people who are feminists, are part of the movement if they hold to the basic propositions of freedom and equality that are part of any feminist political struggle. When laws and social policies represent women, they make tacit decisions about who counts as a woman, and very often make presuppositions about what a woman is. We have seen this in the domain of reproductive rights. So the question I was asking then is: do we need to have a settled idea of

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I put the question that way... to remind us that feminists are committed to thinking about the diverse and historically shifting meanings of gender, and to the ideals of gender freedom. By gender freedom, I do not mean we all get to choose our gender. Rather, we get to make a political claim to live freely and without fear of discrimination and violence against the genders that we are. Many people who were assigned “female” at birth never felt at home with that assignment, and those people (including me) tell all of us something important about the constraints of traditional gender norms for many who fall outside its terms.

Feminists know that women with ambition are called “monstrous” or that women who are not heterosexual are pathologised. We fight those misrepresentations because they are false and because they reflect more about the misogyny of those who make demeaning caricatures than they do about the complex social diversity of women. Women should not engage in the forms of phobic caricature by which they have been traditionally demeaned. And by “women” I mean all those who identify in that way.

AF: How much is toxicity on this issue a function of culture wars playing out online?

JB: I think we are living in anti-intellectual times, and that this is evident across the political spectrum. The quickness of social media allows for forms of vitriol that do not exactly support thoughtful debate. We need to cherish the longer forms.

AF: Threats of violence and abuse would seem to take these “anti-intellectual times” to an extreme. What do you have to say about violent or abusive language used online against people like JK Rowling?

JB: I am against online abuse of all kinds. I confess to being perplexed by the fact that you point out the abuse levelled against JK Rowling, but you do not cite the abuse against trans people and their allies that happens online and in person. I disagree with JK Rowling's view on trans people, but I do not think she should suffer harassment and threats. Let us also remember, though, the threats against trans people in places like Brazil, the harassment of trans people in the streets and on the job in places like Poland and Romania – or indeed right here in the US. So if we are going to object to harassment and threats, as we surely should, we should also make sure we have a large picture of where that is happening, who is most profoundly affected, and whether it is tolerated by those who should be opposing

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AF: You weren't a signatory to the open letter on “cancel culture” in *Harper's* this summer, but did its arguments resonate with you?

JB: I have mixed feelings about that letter. On the one hand, I am an educator and writer and believe in slow and thoughtful debate. I learn from being confronted and challenged, and I accept that I have made some significant errors in my public life. If someone then said I should not be read or listened to as a result of those errors, well, I would object internally, since I don't think any mistake a person made can, or should, summarise that person. We live in time; we err, sometimes seriously; and if we are lucky, we change precisely because of interactions that let us see things differently.

On the other hand, some of those signatories were taking aim at Black Lives Matter as if the loud and public opposition to racism were itself uncivilised behaviour. Some of them have opposed legal rights for Palestine. Others have [allegedly] committed sexual harassment. And yet others do not wish to be challenged on their racism. Democracy requires a good challenge, and it does not always arrive in soft tones. So I am not in favour of neutralising the strong political demands for justice on the part of subjugated people. When one has not been heard for decades, the cry for justice is bound to be loud.

AF: This year, you published, *The Force of Nonviolence*. Does the idea of “radical equality”, which you discuss in the book, have any relevance for the feminist movement?

JB: My point in the recent book is to suggest that we rethink equality in terms of interdependency. We tend to say that one person should be treated the same as another, and we measure whether or not equality has been achieved by comparing individual cases. But what if the individual – and individualism – is part of the problem? It makes a difference to understand ourselves as living in a world in which we are fundamentally dependent on others, on institutions, on the Earth, and to see that this life depends on a sustaining organisation for various forms of life. If no one escapes that interdependency, then we are equal in a different sense. We are equally dependent, that is, equally social and ecological, and that means we cease to understand ourselves only as demarcated individuals. If trans-exclusionary radical feminists understood themselves as sharing a world with trans people, in a common struggle for equality, freedom from violence, and for social recognition, there would be no more trans-exclusionary radical feminists. But feminism would surely survive as a coalitional

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AF: You have spoken about the backlash against “gender ideology”, and wrote an essay **for the *New Statesman*** about it in 2019. Do you see any connection between this and contemporary debates about trans rights?

JB: It is painful to see that Trump’s position that gender should be defined by biological sex, and that the evangelical and right-wing Catholic effort to purge “gender” from education and public policy accords with the trans-exclusionary radical feminists’ return to biological essentialism. It is a sad day when some feminists promote the anti-gender ideology position of the most reactionary forces in our society.

AF: What do you think would break this impasse in feminism over trans rights? What would lead to a more constructive debate?

JB: I suppose a debate, were it possible, would have to reconsider the ways in which the medical determination of sex functions in relation to the lived and historical reality of gender.

*Judith Butler goes by she or they

Alona Ferber is Special Projects Editor at the *New Statesman*.



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