

INTERVIEW

Interview with Judith Butler, philosopher and activist

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Judith Butler (Cleveland, USA 1956) is considered one of the world's most influential intellectuals with her contributions to feminist theory, gender studies, politics and ethics. Critiquing and challenging power structures, in this interview Butler focuses on security, freedom and nonviolence, and on the increasing vulnerability in the pandemic world.

Feminism advocates for an alternative to the traditional view of security, a people-centered and community-based approach that takes into account the differential impact of violence on women and other minoritized groups. Do you share this vision?

I do share this vision, but I also have some questions about it. Why, for instance, is the state increasingly concerned with security rather than with providing health care, shelter, and education for citizens and non-citizens. I am in favour of community-based or grass-roots approaches to ending violence against all women and minorities, including trans people and the genderqueer, but I think that local, state, and international authorities can support these efforts. So I am not always in line with the idea that true change happens only through communities, but not governments, states, or international authorities. We may well need the latter to help protect human rights and the environment.

Which are the main obstacles to achieving security policies different to the predominant ones?

Perhaps the first question we have to ask is whether “security” is invoked for the right reasons. I note, for instance, that the suppression of protests and demonstrations in several countries, including Romania and Poland recently against LGBTQ people, is justified through recourse to security. In the US, the Black Lives Matter movement has also been surveilled and suppressed in the name of “security.” So we can see quite clearly that “security” sometimes means “the secure continuation of the regime in power” at which point the only thing that is endangered is the power of those in power. That is not a security concern, but a partisan political one, and a misuse of state powers. I also think that figuring migrants as a threat to “security” is a false claim which actually relays a fear of the loss of ethnic or racial homogeneity. So “security” needs to be disarticulated from these specious deployments for us to see what we may still value about the term.

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The concept of “security” has many interpretations, such as the concept of “violence”. For example, the Movement Black Lives Matter has pointed out a wide range of social issues, from public health policies to mass incarceration, as State violence. Their critics, meanwhile, have accused them of promoting or inciting violence, especially against police and security officers. How should we deal with the flexibility of these terms , which can be deceiving, as you also pointed out?

Yes, well, terms like “democracy” and “freedom” can also be deployed by those with strong interests in their destruction. The main point for me is not to give up on the terms. We have to fight to stabilize the meaning and direction of the key terms of democracy as well as a political practice of non-violence focused on its systemic forms. Extensive reports on BLM protests establish that very few incidents of violence were initiated by BLM activists, and that the size and strength of the movement consisted in

its radically non-violent character. Indeed, the movement has anti-violence at its core, which includes police brutality and murder, but all the dimensions of the carceral state, including detention and imprisonment.

Do you think that the ideal of security is a life “free of fear”? Or, on the contrary, this idea is not realistic because fear is a central element of human experience?

We only know human experience through the social and historical experiences available to us. So if we get used to living with fear as a way of life, or fear as part of any way of life, we tend to generalize, even universalize fear as a necessary component of life. Of course, I do believe we have reasons to fear fire and floods and accidents, but even those natural disasters are experienced differently depending on whether or not we live in a world that is providing refuge, medical care, and shelter, a world that openly grieves the losses we suffer or reduces them to a statistic of demography.

We find ourselves in the midst of a global vulnerability. In your book *Frames of War*, you state that vulnerability is a feature of our shared and interdependent lives. The problem is how this condition of inevitable fragility is unequally distributed and exploited. Which are your thoughts regarding vulnerability at this moment, in a context of global pandemic?

I am struck by the fact that in the US long entrenched forms of social inequality have produced minority populations, mainly black and brown people (including the indigenous), who are suffering greater losses from Covid-19 than the rest of the country. The figures show a disproportionate number of people from those communities who are suffering worse forms of the illness and dying more rapidly and in greater numbers. How do we think about their vulnerability to the illness? On the one hand, we are all vulnerable, and the virus does not know anything about class and race. On the other hand, there is a socially constituted vulnerability that reflects long-standing social inequality, including lack of equal access to health care. So we can see that vulnerability has this dual dimension: it universalizes, but it also lays bare the radical inequalities among us. It may be, as some public health officials have argued, that only by first addressing social inequality will we be able to effectively address the pandemic. After all, we are starting to see how the vaccine distribution will take place. Will the poor

and the unhoused be identified as those most in need? Or will they be abandoned again?

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The debate on how to prioritize public safety without conflicting with human rights has emerged worldwide with the response to the pandemic. In order to stop COVID-19, we have witnessed the limitation of the right to freedom of expression and the right of free movement, war-rhetoric and the leading role of security and military forces. What is your opinion on the balance between freedom and security? Is there a risk that these exceptional measures will set a precedent for future crises?

The problem is not a tension between “public safety” and human rights, but the threat that “public safety” will expand to exclude many basic rights and even criminalize human rights themselves. At the same time, perhaps we can include “public health” as a category that is also sometimes spuriously invoked to justify the suppression of feminist and LGBTQ movements as well as anti-racist and migrant rights movements. The eugenics model has dominated the reactionary politics against migration. Recently, the British monarchy sought recourse to the same category when it asked that the Netflix series, *The Crown*, include a “public health” notice that the series is fiction, not fact. To answer your question, though, we all should worry that the augmentation of state powers under the pandemic will not be relinquished in a post-pandemic world. When reproductive rights and sexual freedom become “public health” issues, they are subject to regulation and criminalization. Indeed, the sphere of humanitarian aid, arguably part of the human rights framework, has already been criminalized in the Mediterranean, and that sets a terrible precedent.

You discuss not only about equality, but also about what you call “the radical equality of grievability”. What might such an ideal entail in practice?

I suppose it is a way of asking what the world would be like if we really thought of all lives as equally valuable. If we object to the ease and shamelessness with which minorities are killed by the police, or left to die by health care and migration policies, then we will struggle to change those institutions so that each life is treated equally. To be grievable is to be, in this life, a life that would be grieved if it were lost. Too often we live in a world in which some lives are considered ungrievable, not really living, not really human, easy to lose, if not already lost.

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Instead of insisting on the dimension of care, like other feminist theorists, you direct the attention to the individual and collective capacity for resistance and action to achieve a fairer distribution of social conditions. Which are the means to channel this capacity towards transforming power structure transformation? Should they imply nonviolence?

I am in favour of care, and I especially like the new *The Care Manifesto* that has been published by Verso (and which, I hope, will appear in Catalan). But care is too often regarded as an ethical disposition, even a maternal prerogative, and I believe it must operate in ways that do not restrict it to women or the domestic sphere. Too often we think of non-violence as a personal moral stand, but if we can identify states, institutions, and policies as reproducing violence, then we need to oppose those larger structures as part of our non-violent practice. It takes a strong and transformative resistance movement to do so.

Authoritarian regimes are gaining ground. How do you perceive the future? Do you feel hopeful about any important change for global politics?

Right now I am encouraged by the radical democratic ideals embodied in social movements, the continuing student struggles against the Apartheid legacy in South Africa, *Ni una menos* in Argentina and throughout Latin America as it fights inequality and violence both, Black Lives Matter in the US and its alliance with the Palestinian struggle for freedom and dignity, Extinction Rebellion and other climate justice movements. Such movements keep ideals alive when states often compromise them in practice. My wager is that the authoritarians will keep falling: Netanyahu, Bolsonaro, Orban. The question is whether social movements and electoral systems can come to terms with one another. That is where the negotiations can be difficult. But I have hope.

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