DIPLOMARBEIT

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Judith Butler: a political theorist?

Verfasser

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Abbreviations

BM	*Bodies that Matter*
CF	"Contingent Foundations"
CR	"For a Careful Reading"
CU	"Competing Universalities"
DC	"Dynamic Conclusions"
ES	*Excitable Speech*
GA	*Giving an Account of Oneself*
GT	*Gender Trouble*
PL	*Precarious Life*
PLP	*The Psychic Life of Power*
RU	"Restaging the Universal"
SD	*Subjects of Desire*
SUB	"Subjekt"
UG	*Undoing Gender*
WC	"What is critique?"

Contents

Introduction

The title already indicates the issue to be discussed in this inquiry: Judith Butler: a political theorist? Even though the title is formulated as a question, it takes more the form of a claim here. In other words, the aim of this inquiry is to read and present Judith Butler[1] as a political theorist.

First of all, to read Butler as a political theorist means to support the claim that Butler should be included into the canon of political theory and political science respectively. If we consider introductions to political science or lexicons of political thought,[2] we are confronted with the fact that Butler is often not included in these volumes,[3] and when she is it is in most cases in the context of a theory of feminism, and, accordingly, the main focus is usually on *Gender Trouble* and the challenge of feminism it presents.[4] It is in the light of this situation that the present inquiry claims that Butler's work presents an important contribution to political theory. Even though this claim has yet to find resonance in the mainstream of the discipline, the present inquiry is not the first one that treats Butler's work as a contribution to political theory, as a number of books and articles can be found that argue in favor of this cause (Lloyd 2005, Stone 2005 and Loizidou 2007, Distelhorst 2007 and Chambers/Carver 2008).

But there is also another way of reading the title: Judith Butler: A political theorist. The notion 'political theorist' can also be read with emphasis on *political* theorist. To read Butler as a *political* theorist means to suggest that her work is political through and through, in other words, that politics is at the core of Butler's work. Indeed, Butler's work

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1 Judith Butler studied philosophy at Yale University, receiving her Ph.D. In 1984. She is currently the Maxine Elliott Professor in the Rhetoric and Comparative Literature departments at the University of California, Berkeley.

2 One might argue that this is the case because Butler's theory is still relatively new, and the development of these kinds of books simply works at a slower pace. However, a brief research in Wikipedia suggests that it is not only a matter of the pace of the medium, because in Wikipedia's list of political philosophers – which includes a lot of names whose status as political philosophers could be put into question – Judith Butler is not mentioned either (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_philosophers (4.7.2010)). What is eye-catching/striking about this list is the general lack of women. Out of approximately 140 names, less than 10 are women. This is not only due to the fact that there were no women in the history of political philosophy, but also because of non-representation of those women that could and arguably should be on that list. For instance, whereas Jean-Paul Sartre is on that list, Simone de Beauvoir is conspicuously missing.

3 An important exception is the article by Claudia Creutzberg in the volume *Politische Theorien der Gegenwart* (Creutzberg 2006).

4 In the *Handbuch Politische Theorien und Ideologien*, Barbara Holland-Cruz, for instance, writes in 2000 that *Gender Trouble* is "an already classic text of postmodern feminism" [ein bereits klassischer Text des postmodernen Feminismus] (Holland-Cruz, 2000, 371). And the volume *Hauptwerke der politischen Theorie*, published in 2007, also includes Butler's *Gender Trouble* as one of the main works of political theory (Stammen/Riescher, Hofmann 2007, 102-105).

certainly deals with the concept of politics. In this context, her writings form a challenge of classic political theory, because they put the notion of politics as well as the status of political theory into questions. The inclusion of Butler into the canon of political science will, therefore, not remain without consequences for the shape of this discipline.

I used the terms 'politics' and 'political' quite often in the first few paragraphs of this inquiry and one might argue that the meanings of these terms remain highly vague. Unfortunately, this situation will not change in the course of this inquiry, it will rather become intensified and more urgent. To begin with, we have to be aware that even within the discipline of political science there is not one single notion of politics. Rather, there is an ongoing debate about what this term precisely signifies, and, consequently, most research approaches work with a provisional definition suitable for the intended analysis. In the case of Butler's work, the situation gets more complicated, because she does not allow for such a provisional definition, but forces us to dig deeper into the foundation of our understanding of politics. By challenging those foundations, Butler forces us to think about them once again, and this may force us to reconsider those foundations as in themselves already political, thus revealing the radical ungrounded nature of all notions of politics.

The present inquiry will deal with two main themes. First, Butler's account of the political subject will be analyzed. Some political scientists may wonder at this point what a theory of the subject has to do with what they are doing. Traditionally, political science is not very interested in the question of individual political agents, even though they are – as I want to show in chapter two – a basic category of the conception of politics. In cases where individual agents are included in the analysis, a rather simplistic conception of the political agent, which is based on the capacity to make rational decisions and a certain ability of self-determination, has been taken for granted. In the light of Butler's work, this presupposition of the political agent appears as a form of naivety. Thus, I want to suggest that the account of the political subject might turn out to be Butler's main contribution to political thought, because, on the one hand, it forces us to reintroduce the concept of the political agent into our notion of politics, and, on the other hand, it requires a reconceptualization of the political agent beyond traditional notions of rationality and self-determination. As a result of Butler's challenge, the concept of the political subject needs to be reintroduced into the political sphere in order to become a crucial site of political struggle.

Second, the present inquiry presents Butler's notion of performativity as a political theory. This is a new idea in two ways. First, it is unusual to read Butler's notion of performativity in terms of political theory. Second, the notion of performativity is new to political theory,

which has not been working with such a concept up to this point. In my view, the notion of performativity has three distinct features that allow me to characterize it as a political theory. It offers a comprehensive theory of agency, an explanation of social change, and it can be characterized by a main focus on power; three main features that one can traditionally expect from a contribution to political theory. However, this reading of performativity as a political theory will also require certain reformulations of Butler's account. But these reformulations seem rather minor and justifiable, as they enable an appreciation and application of Butler's account in the discipline of political theory. Most importantly, this reformulation will put an emphasis on the connection of a notion of performativity with a theory of hegemony. These two concepts work together to make a critical analysis of relations of power and domination possible and they offer an explanation for the relative stability of these relations as well as for the possibility of resistance and alteration.

It will require a detailed interrogation of Butler's account of the political subject and of her notion of performativity to be able to appreciate Butler's complex notion of politics. Insisting on the radically ungrounded nature of politics, Butler focuses on the contingency and contextuality of all political actions. Because no political category can be taken for granted, we have to insist that these categories are radically open for political contestation and resignification. I will denote this principal openness of all categories for resignification – which is the most crucial aspect of Butler's notion of politics – with the term resignifiability. However, resignifiability is not in itself a political strategy. Thus, Butler links the contingency and openness of all categories with a project of radical democracy and supports the need for multiple political strategies in various contexts.

The present inquiry intends to be a contribution to the reception of Butler's work. Already speaking in a Butlerian terminology, we can say that the reception of an author is discursively produced from the beginning and remains open for continuous discursive reproduction. However, certain lines of reception may eventually be so powerful that they can gain a hegemonic status, thus suppressing other lines of reception. Therefore, it is necessary to take on the history of the reception and to challenge the predominant lines of the reception in order to open up new perspectives. My strategy will not be the presentation of new texts. All text analyzed in this inquiry are well known and have been commented hundreds of times. Nevertheless, I suggest going back to these supposedly well known texts and to reread them. In doing so, I will primarily focus on Butler's writings of the 1990s – most essays on Butler focus on this period of her work while widely ignoring her early beginnings as well as her more recent developments, a fact I am critical of, but which I will

nevertheless repeat here – because I think that a lot can be found in these texts for a political theory which has not been sufficiently interpreted yet.

However, I want to broaden this narrow focus more and more in the course of this inquiry through an inclusion of Butler's more recent writings. I hope to be able to highlight points of continuity as well as certain changes that have occurred in these more recent texts. There is a certain danger that following the project of this inquiry will lead to an unjustified unification of Butler's work. Indeed, I read Butler's work in a more unified way than it eventually is, and also more uniform than Butler herself thinks it should be. In my opinion, such a unification is partially necessary in order to present a coherent argument. Nevertheless, I also want to discuss certain aspects of Butler's work which do not necessarily support my argument. In addition, I will not be shy to formulate critique where I think it is required. However, the focus will be on the main line of argumentation, and this is the presentation of Butler's contribution to the discipline of political theory.

Part 1: Narrowing down the Question: Methodological Considerations

This first part wants to offer an introduction to the approach and the main themes of the present inquiry. The first chapter explicates the main thesis and distinguishes two ways of reading it, which can be referred to as the weak version and the strong version. The the second chapter will discuss the concept of the political subject that is prevalent in mainstream political science, or, rather, it will highlight how political science lacks an adequate conception of the political subject. In the subsequent sections of chapter two, the attempt will be made to give a first outlook on the connection of subject and politics and the different notions of the subject to be discussed. The summary of the main tendencies in the early reception and contestation of Butler will form the content of chapter three.

1. The Thesis: Butler as a Political Theorist

This inquiry has a very simple and straightforward thesis. I want to defend the claim that Butler is a political theorist in her own right. She deals in original and powerful ways with problems and challenges of politics as well as with themes and issues of political theory, and her work should therefore be considered as an important contribution to contemporary political thought.

This thesis, however, is all but self-evident. This is especially true in the context of the

German-speaking reception of Butler's work.[5] If we take a look at the reception of Butler in the German-speaking area, we can see – particularly in contrast to the developments in the Anglo-American debate – "the constriction of the German reception, which was lost in a one-sided controversy about the opposition of nature and culture of the *Geschlechter*-difference and the threatening depoliticization of feminist theory" ["welcher Engführung die deutsche Rezeption unterlag, die sich in einer einseitigen Auseinandersetzung über den Gegensatz von Natur und Kultur der Geschlechterdifferenz und die drohende Entpolitisierung feministischer Theorie verlor"] (Distelhorst 2009, 15)[6]. Butler was primarily received as a theorist of feminism and gender, and the reactions to her contribution in those disciplines were in most cases negative or even hostile, because the fear was that her theory would lead to a depoliticization and would put the successes that had already been achieved into jeopardy.[7] We can already see some of the main tendencies of this reception if we take a look at the available introductions to Butler's thought. Paula-Irene Villa[8] for example writes in her introduction that she wants to present Butler "mainly as a feminist theorist" ["hauptsächlich als feministische Theoretikerin"] (Villa 2003, 16), and she sees Butler's contribution to politics first and foremost in connection with her status as a founder of queer theory. Thus, Villa adds a chapter in her introduction with the heading "*Queer Politics*" in which she concentrates on the subversive resignification of repressive categorizations (Villa 2003, 102ff.). The same is true of the introduction by Hannelore Bublitz[9], which also includes a chapter on "Butler′s Political Theory" which narrows it to a notion of queer politics that is understood as the subversive proliferation of (gender) identities (Bublitz 2002, 75ff.). As will be shown in this inquiry, this restricted view of Butler's political theory as "queer politics" caused a very one-sided view of the concepts of performativity – in the reception often tightly linked to performance – and a focus on the parody of gender norms and identities. It was this restricted reception in particular that did not allow for a comprehensive appreciation of Butler's account and for a recognition of her contribution to political theory. Butler was mainly seen as a theorist of feminism and

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5 In this respect, the present inquiry has an ambivalent status, because, on the one hand, it is written in English and is primarily based on English sources, but, on the other hand, the author is a German native speaker, who has spent most of his studies in German-speaking Vienna, where he is also seeking to get his degree.

6 All quotes from German sources are cited in my own translation with the German original in square brackets.

7 I will deal with these tendencies of the reception of Butler's work in more detail in chapter three. The following remarks will only be an outline for orientation.

8 Paula-Irene Villa is a German-Argentinian sociologist. She is currently a professor of Sociology and Gender Studies in the Sociology department at the University of Munich.

9 Hannelore Bublitz is a German sociologist. Since 1995, she is a professor of Sociology at the University of Paderborn, Germany.

gender and her contribution was not considered as a chance, but as a danger by those working in those disciplines.

Yet, in recent years a significant change in the reception of Butler's thought has been observed. In the early reception of Butler, it was commonly accepted that the controversy around Butler's work was mainly focused on *Gender Trouble* and the corresponding engagements in feminist and gender theory and the emergence of queer theory. This was accompanied by the assumption that there needs to be a "locating" ["Verortung"] of Butler "within the context of the USA of the 1990s" ["im Kontext der USA der 1990er Jahre"] (Villa 2003, 13). But in recent years, this implicit consent has begun to crumble. Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver[10] point out that Butler should not be contextualized as a thinker of the 1990s, as if her theory was already outdated. On the contrary, they want to argue "that Butler's time may have just arrived" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6). In correspondence with this claim, a variety of books and articles has been published in recent years that treat Butler as a political theorist (Disch 1999, White 1999, Coole 2005, Lloyd 2005, Stone 2005 and Loizidou 2007 Distelhorst 2007 and 2009, Müller 2009, Sauer 2009). Birgit Sauer[11], for instance, suggests that a reconstruction of Butler's texts "as contributions to a feminist theory of democracy and the state" ["als Beiträge zu einer feministischen Demokratie- und Staatstheorie"] might make it possible to conceptualize "the ability of junction to a gender critique in political science, in particular to a democratic theory and a theory of the state that argues along a theory of hegemony" [„die Anschlussfähigkeit an die politikwissenschaftliche Geschlechterkritik, vornehmlich an eine hegemonietheoretisch argumentierende Staats- und Demokratietheorie"] (Sauer 2009, 151).

Even though the thesis that Butler is a political theorist is still far from being self-evident, it can be located within the context of an ongoing shift in the reception of Butler's work. In approximately the last five years, several new lines of interpretation of Butler's work have opened up, lines I want to follow and support in this inquiry.

The Weak Version

Butler is a political theorist in her own right – that means that her work can be read as an important contribution to contemporary politics and the corresponding efforts in political

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10 Samuel A. Chambers is currently an assistant professor of Political Theory and Cultural Politics in the department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University. Terrell Carver (born 1946) is a professor of Political Theory at the University of Bristol.

11 Birgit Sauer is a German political scientist. She is currently a professor of Political Science in the department of Political Science at the University of Vienna.

theory. This thesis corresponds with the claim that Butler's work should be read as an important input for the endeavors of political theory. If Butler is a political theorist in her own right, it should be clear that her work accordingly needs to be read as a contribution to political theory.

As already mentioned, I am luckily not the first to support this thesis and to make this claim that might still seem far-fetched in the eyes of many scholars. Chambers and Carver, for instance, seek, in a very similar way, "to defend a straightforward and direct argument: Butler is a crucially important political theorist in her own right." (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6) But they also point out that there is "a whole host of problems" with that thesis and that they therefore "will neither articulate nor defend that thesis in a direct or sequential manner" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6). What problems are there with this thesis? First, Chambers and Carver point out that it is simply too general, because arguing for this thesis requires a long list of preliminary questions (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6). We would first of all need a clear-cut conception of political theory or the political theorist. In a next step it would be necessary to adopt criteria that allow us to determine who counts as a political theorist under those certain conceptions. And then, maybe, we could judge if Butler meets those criteria and can therefore count as a political theorist. It should be immediately clear that such a project is absolutely hopeless from the beginning. As a consequence, I neither want to give a clear-cut definition of political theory – as if such a definition exists – nor do I want to establish a set of criteria that determine who might count as a political theorist. In addition, Chambers and Carver point out that there are not only conceptual problems with this thesis, it also proves to be "*highly contentious* and politically fraught" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6). Supporting this thesis might put one under fire from all sides. To begin with, traditional representatives of the established discipline of political science or the subfield of political theory would hardly accept that Butler should be granted the status as a 'political theorist' and they can present good arguments for their case. If we look at Butler's education and profession, we cannot find anything that qualifies her as a political theorist. She has a PhD in philosophy, she is a professor at a department of rhetoric and comparative literature and it could also be pointed out that her major scholarly contribution has been in other fields – feminist or queer theory, for example – but not within the established academic discipline of political theory. Thus, for a traditional representative of the discipline of political science, Butler could never be a political theorist in her own right (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6). Chambers and Carver then say that there is another group of scholars that might discredit the thesis, even though this time from the opposite

perspective:

> These critics (made up almost entirely of scholars working outside the disciplinary boundaries of political science) will loudly insist that Butler is *obviously* a political theorist, and they will therefore reject not so much the locutionary meaning of the thesis, but the illocutionary force. In other words, this group will assume that our intention in posing the claim 'Butler is a political theorist' must be to question it (Chambers/Carver 2008, 6).

Hence, Chambers and Carver convincingly show that to defend this thesis puts one in a no-win situation and they make clear: "We take the time to narrate the rules of the game here so as to clarify our choice *not to play it*" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 7).

They continue with three further difficulties one has to face when defending such a thesis. First, Butler is neither an analytic thinker that presents her argument in a systematic fashion, nor can she simply be reduced to a skeptical critique of such traditional lines of thought. Second, she accordingly does not present a systematic theory of politics and therefore it would be a mistake to discuss something like '*the* political theory' of Judith Butler. Third, Butler's work is intrinsically interdisciplinary, she refuses to work within the tight boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and she therefore deals with a broad variety of fields and disciplines (Chambers/Carver 2008, 7). Chamber and Carver point out the conclusion for the method of their book:

> For all these reasons, we will evade any direct encounters with the thesis 'Butler is a political theorist′, and we will resist the possible temptation to play games of categorisation (e.g. 'it's feminist theory!', 'no, it's gender theory!', etc.). Instead, we will work in a non-systematic manner to investigate, elucidate and elaborate Butler's writings as they *relate* (taken in a broad sense) to politics and political theory (Chambers/Carver 2008, 7).

As an alternative, Chambers and Carver suggest the "elaboration of Butler and political theory through a series of very specific and focused engagements […]. It is the detailed elaboration of these engagements that, taken as a whole, should give the reader a clear sense of Butler′s places within contemporary political theory" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 7).

This investigation into specific themes also corresponds with Butler's own approach, insofar as she is not interested in general questions about the discipline of political theory, but rather wants to deal with concrete issues of politics. Therefore, it would not be in line with Butler's approach to talk *about* political theory, instead Butler's thought requests us to become involved *in* political theory. The question if Butler is a political theorist or not is ultimately futile, as long as it is only debated on an abstract level of classifications. The relevant question is if and in what way Butler is able to contribute to concrete queries of political theory, and what consequences her contributions entail. In conclusion, the aim of this investigation should not be to talk about political theory on a meta-level, but to deal with concrete tasks of political theory and to productively contribute to it.

In the present inquiry, I want to focus on two specific engagements of Butler with political theory. First, I want to raise the question of the political subject and investigate the contribution Butler makes in this respect. As I want to claim in chapter two, the query of the subject is a major theme that – even though this fact is usually not recognized and remains a presupposition that is taken for granted – every encounter with political theory has to sort out before it can turn to subsequent matters. As I will present in chapter three, the early reception of Butler's thought was, paradoxically, also centered around the question of the political subject, but in that context, Butler was not received as a chance, but as a threat to the feminist subject and the possibility of agency. Against this main tendency of the early reception, I want to argue that the political subject turns out to be the theme where Butler could have the most significant impact on political theory. Second, I want to show how the notion of performativity can be read as a contribution to political theory. Even though it cannot provide an answer to all challenges of this discipline – it is unrealistic to expect that from any single approach – it deals with at least three important aspects of political theory: The critical analysis of relations of power and domination, the question of social stability and change and the theory of political agency.

Finally, I want to mention one last objection to the thesis of this inquiry, which Chambers and Carver do not mention. There might be scholars in the disciplines of feminist theory, gender studies or queer theory to whom Butler is an important source of inspiration, and these scholars could get the impression that the thesis 'Butler is a political theorist' is an attempt to downplay her influence on their respective disciplines. Even though I will, in fact, treat the issues of gender identity and the query of the subject of feminism as examples for more general claims about the concept of identity and the status of the subject, that will not be done in order to downplay the importance of Butler's contribution to the thinking about identities and subject positions in those specific disciplines; quite on the contrary, it will be done to highlight it and to point out how these insights might be valid not only for gender identities and the feminist subject, but for identities and subject positions in general. One needs to take into critical consideration – as I have shown before – that it was in the wake of a certain interpretation of Butler's work that the tendency developed to reduce politics to a certain limited notion of politics, for instance a – again quite restricted – concept of 'queer politics' (Bublitz 2002 and Villa 2003). But queer politics should not reduce itself to a politics of queer, just as feminist politics should not be restricted to politics of feminism (Sauer 2001, 36). Therefore, I suggest that the generalization I perform in this inquiry – even though it does not explicitly deal with the respective

categories – is ultimately in the interest of a critical theory of feminism and gender as well. To deal with identities and subject position in a general way that does not restrict those categories to specific notions of identity and certain kinds of subject is also in line with Butler's insistence that identity is always constituted along multiple axes such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, profession etc. Therefore, only an investigation that considers Butler's engagement with political theory in its whole complexity – and also generality – can adequately estimate her contribution to this discipline.

The Strong Version

Thus far the thesis that 'Butler is a political theorist' has been read in a way that could be reduced to the claim that Butler's work should be received in the realm of this discipline, because it presents an important contribution to contemporary debates in political theory. Now I want to denote this claim, which is basically centered around the question of reception, as the weak version of the thesis, because there is also an alternative way of considering Butler a political theorist. In this second version, calling Butler a political theorist indicates that her work taken for itself should be read as an essentially *political* theory. This strong version of the thesis claims that it is useful and fruitful to read Butler as a *political* theorist, because her work is most convincing when read as a contribution to a *political* theory. On that note, Butler's work can be read as an argument for the *political* and for engagement with *political* theory.

In order to comprehend Butler's *political* theory, we have to be aware that it cannot be treated within the realm of conventional conceptions of politics. Butler's notion of the political cannot be reduced to interest-group politics or party politics. Butler is very critical of any liberal model of politics, because she rejects the premises of such models. For instance, already in *Gender Trouble* Butler formulates her problems with the concept of a social contract, as presented in Rousseau or Locke, because it "is understood to presuppose the rational choice or deliberate will of those it is said to govern" (GT 168). Butler refuses "the classical liberal and existential model of freedom", because she insists that "power is not reduced to volition" and that the deliberate will cannot be presupposed, and suggests instead a model in which "power-relations can be understood, as I think they ought to be, as constraining and constituting the very possibility of volition" (GT 169). Similarly, she is also critical of a notion of politics that is based on dialogue, because, first, she notes that "the very notion of 'dialogue' is culturally specific and culturally bound", and, second, before such a model of dialogue can be established, "the power relations that condition and

limit dialogic possibilities need first to be interrogated" (GT 20). Butler's point is that "the model of dialogue" otherwise "risks relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes 'agreement' and 'unity' and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought" (GT 20). But Butler's suspicion is not only directed towards classic liberal notions of politics. In *Gender Trouble* she also develops her critique of identity politics, more or less for the same reasons. To sum up, we can state that Butler challenges any notion of politics that presupposes a fixed subject – whether an individual or a group – whose interests merely need to be represented. She radically puts into question the premise of a subject prior to the political that can serve as foundation of politics. She asks for new modes of politics that do not presuppose a fixed subject, but instead includes the constitution of political identities in the realm of the political.

The term 'the political' is not used in a prominent way in Butler's work, but it might be useful to give a preliminary illustration of her project here. The issues Butler focuses on are not reducible to the political sphere or the political system in a conventional sense. As Thomas Bedorf[12] points out, the distinction of *the political* and *politics* is first of all due to the dissatisfaction with the current political situation and the corresponding notions of politics. So, *the political* is a critical term that is distinguished from politics, which has degenerated to a sub-system designed for interest coordination in the liberal societies. In that regard, *the political* is also a sign for a renewal of political theory, a political theory that is not satisfied with the options liberal societies currently provide. The main character of *the political*, common to all variations of the use of the term, is the contingency that it intrinsically implies. Whereas politics is traditionally deemed to be based on a fixed foundation, the political is considered to be without such a substantial origin or ground, on which it could once and for all be founded. (Bedorf 2010, 232f.) And, most importantly, *the political* does not presuppose pre-established identities that seek for representation subsequently, but takes place precisely at the very moment when identities are constituted: "*The Political* occurs where collective identities are *founded, politics* takes place where institutionally ensured identities are *negotiated* and *bargained* with" ["*Politisches* geschieht dort, wo kollektive Identitäten *gestiftet* werden, *Politik* vollzieht sich dort, wo mit institutionell gesicherten Identitäten *ge-* und *verhandelt* wird."] (Bedorf 2010, 237).

As already said, Butler does not use this distinction in her work and this is only one of the

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12 Thomas Bedorf is a German philosopher. He is currently employed in the department of Philosophy at the FernUniversität in Hagen.

reasons why it will not be used in the present inquiry either. The other reason is that it seems to me that Butler's project does not aim at a distinction between these two spheres, but rather at a transformation of politics itself in order to show that it is actually already in the realm of *the political*. For instance, she writes in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble* that "this theoretical inquiry has attempted to locate the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identity" (GT 201). "This effort", she continues, requires to "extend the very notion of the political" (GT 201), which – given the distinction of politics and the political – would refer to politics. And a few pages earlier, Butler highlights that the argument she presented in *Gender Trouble* "opens up other configurations, not only of gender and bodies, but of politics itself" (GT 194). In the course of this inquiry I hope to be able to point out the new notion of politics that is on its way to take shape in Butler's work, and I hope to be able to show how Butler turns out to be a crucially *political* theorist, in the sense of the term *political* that was just introduced.

2. The Topic: The Political Subject as Category of Political Theory

In this inquiry, I have the ambition to reread Butler's work as a political theory in its own right. In oder to do so, I want to focus on Butler's theory of the political subject. The primary objection such a project has to face arguably is: What has the subject to do with politics? Why should a theory of the subject be important for a theory of politics and for political practice? And more specific: What role does the subject play in political theory? Does political theory actually need a theory of the political subject? I want to defend the claim that it does. However, I am aware that this claim will not receive unanimous agreement. In fact, there is probably a significant number of scholars in the discipline of political science that might disagree. The question then is: Why should political science open up for a theory of the political subject? What is the benefit for the discipline of political science if it does so?

Mainstream Political Science

To begin with, I want to take a look at some mainstream theories in political science. I can certainly not cover all theories in political science and I do not even intend to be representative in my selection. The following very general and simplistic outline only has the purpose of showing the way in which mainstream theories of political science deal – or rather, do not deal – with the question of the political subject. I can certainly not provide a

comprehensive account of the history of the discipline,[13] and I will especially be forced to ignore all the achievements that have already taken place to enrich the scope of this discipline.[14]

In the 1950s and 1960s, political scientist have tried to reestablish their discipline as a more empirically oriented, more 'scientific' discipline within a broader field of social sciences. David Easton[15], for instance, developed a theory that tried to understand politics as a system. In this theory, the political system was conceptualized as a never-ending process of feedback circles. The main idea is that the environment of the political system produces inputs to the political system in the form of demands and supports for political decisions. Those inputs lead to certain outputs which the political system produces in the form of decisions and actions. Those outputs act on the environment and effect change in it. The effect of the output on the environment and the changes caused in the environment may lead to new demands and supports, basically setting the process up to start again from the beginning, thus leading to never ending policy circles (Easton 1965).

Another common paradigm we can consider in this context of a renewal of political science – and the social sciences in general – is the AGIL-scheme developed by Talcott Parsons[16]. AGIL is an acronym for the four functions every social system has to accomplish: adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency. Adaptation means the capacity of the system to interact with its environment and to exchange resources of all kinds with it. Goal attainment denotes the ability to define goals, to make decisions that lead to the achievement of these goals and to evaluate the success of those decisions. Integration is the harmonization of the system, guaranteeing the cohesion of the society. Finally, latency means securing the structures of the system by maintaining its main elements. It is about the maintenance and the passing on of institutional settings, values and systems of belief. In Parsons's point of view, every system has to permanently accomplish all four functions to sustain itself as a system. The claim is that every society, in fact every organized group of people can be seen and conceptualized as a system of such a kind (Patzelt 2003, 50f.).

What is common to both of those paradigms is that both are oriented towards system

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13 For a comprehensive account of history and scope of political science see Goodin/Klingemann 1998, Patzelt 2003, Brodocz/Schaal 2006 and Shively 2007.
14 Several contributions of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, for instance, discuss important matters that are similar to Butler's challenges of traditional political theory (Dryzek/Honig/Phillips 2006).
15 David Easton is a Canadian political scientist. He is a former President of the American Political Science Association and currently Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine.
16 Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was an American sociologist at Harvard University. He first developed an action theory in line with the paradigm of positivism and later turned to the paradigm of system theory.

analysis and do not employ a notion of the political subject. Instead, the paradigm of the political system is combined with a behavioral approach to political action. The introduction of behavior as a central unit for analysis also played an important role in establishing political science as an empirical discipline. The notion of behavior reduces political actions to empirically observable occurrences, thus allowing political science to reestablish itself after the model of natural sciences (Easton 1965).

In his introduction to political science, Werner Patzelt[17] explains that theories in political science can be systematized according to two axes of characterization. The first axis is whether they operate on a micro or on a macro level. The second is whether they are more concerned with the behavior of individual or collective agents or if they focus on the dimensions of the system (Patzelt 2003, 477). The two paradigms considered above clearly fall into the category of macro-system-theories, even though the categorization is not that clear because – as seen in the case of Easton – it is important even for system oriented theories to develop some theory of political action. Regarding theories that Patzelt labels as focusing on political action, we can see that they move in a similar direction as Easton did with his approach. Patzelt mentions behaviorist accounts, rational choice theories and game theory as examples for theories dealing with political action (Patzelt 2003 478). Thus, all the theories which he considers in his introduction intend to explain political action either as empirically observable behavior or as some sort of rational decision making. In other words, they try to conceptualize political action by means of models taken from the methods of the natural sciences. We can add that this orientation of the methods along these lines does not seem to be an important matter of discussion among political scientists, but rather a basic agreement. Accordingly, there seems to be no need to ask about the specifics of political action, or to wonder if there might be specifics that cannot be conceptualized by the described methods.

In this context, I would like to consider the definition of politics Patzelt provides: "Politics is the kind of human action that aims at the production and enforcement of generally binding regulations and decisions within and among groups of humans" ["Politik ist jenes menschliche Handeln, das auf die Herstellung und Durchsetzung allgemein verbindlicher Regelungen und Entscheidungen (dh. von allgemeiner Verbindlichkeit) in und zwischen Gruppen von Menschen abzielt"] (Patzelt 2003, 23). One of the main, if not the main term in this definition of politics is the notion of human action, and, furthermore, the kind of

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17 Werner Patzelt is a German political scientist. He is currently a professor of Comparative Politics in the department of Political Science at the TU Dresden.

human action that can be further specified to be a distinct political action. This central placement of political action in the definition of politics makes it even more urgent to point out that this notion gets, again, no attention at all or is explained by behavioral theories or by rationalistic accounts that reduce it to empirically observable or mathematically predictable behavior.

To sum up, the specifics of political action – even though the notion of political action is crucial for the definition of politics itself – remain for the most part without adequate consideration in the discipline of political science. The result is a reductionist account of political action and human action in general. If we do not agree to accept this methodological reduction as the basis for political science, however, we have to raise a series of questions that are necessarily beyond the scope of that reductionist methodological paradigm. The most urgent questions are: What makes an action a political action? Who is actually the agent that can perform political action? What constitutes his/her agency?

The Subject and Politics

As we can see, one major problem with the claim I want to defend in this inquiry is that Butler's insistence on the importance of the political subject is foreign to the main methodological paradigms of mainstream political science. In mainstream political science, the notion of the political agent is normally not at all seen as an important theoretical concern. The main questions political scientists ask is: What is politics? and they are normally not as concerned with the question: Who is doing politics? Political scientist usually focus on an investigation of collective subjects (e.g. political parties, interest groups, institutions) and the emergence of these subjects is normally not seen as a concern for research. If individual agents come into the focus of research, they are usually conceptualized by means of behavioral or rationalist theories, as seen in the previous subsection. Hence, the political subject – individual or collective – and its emergence do not become a significant problem for the political scientist.

For Butler, in contrast, it is clear that every theory of politics must begin with an investigation into the subject of politics. Who is doing politics? thus becomes one of the main questions for political analysis. The question has to be asked more precisely: Who can count as a political subject? Who is entitled to be a political agent? That means, who is in the position to be the origin of political action? The answer to those questions is not a given, it is not self-evident who the political agent is.

The main concern for the present inquiry is: What are the implications when Butler claims

that the subject and its agency are the basis for every theory of politics, probably even for every theory of the social?[18] If she was right, we would have to state that the ignorance of this question is one of the major shortcomings of classic social theories. Social theory would then be confronted with the challenge that it basically leaves its most crucial question unsettled. In is in this respect that Butler can call the subject " an inevitable stumbling block in social theory"[19] (PLP 14). Informed about Butler's theory of the subject, one is inclined to support the claim that every theory of politics has always already implicitly made a decision about the political subject, even though the question has likely never become explicit. In other words, every theory of politics needs to presuppose an answer to the questions: What is a political subject? and: Who can count as such a subject? in order to possess its basic unit of analysis, political action. As Diana Coole[20] states: "Agency has been central to modern conceptions of politics since it is agents that are accredited with the power to bring about effective change in collective life" (Coole 2005, 124).

Maybe this is one of the reasons why Butler was regarded with so many reservations, because she puts into questions what seems to be the obvious, forces one to challenge what previously seemed to be a common ground. The question is: Is Butler's insistence on the category of the political subject a challenge of political science in general? Or can the political subject be integrated into the theoretical framework of this discipline? Or, to take one step further, could it even be that Butler's theory pushes for new modes of political science? Those alternatives would at least need some serious consideration. Moya Lloyd[21], "a political theorist by training" (Lloyd 2005, 7) as she states herself, begins her book B*eyond Identity Politics* with a chapter named "the subject and politics" (Lloyd 2005, 1). In this introduction, she states that her aim is the reconfiguration of politics by what she calls "subject-in-process" (Lloyd 2005, 1), a term that is meant to describe the idea that the subject is not a stable and fixed entity, but constituted of multiple dimensions. Lloyd's book – which is clearly influenced by Butler's theory, but also by other 'poststructuralist' thinkers such as Foucault or Derrida – intends to present a "radical rethinking of the subject-politics relation" and to investigate the consequences such a reconceptualization

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18 We have to notice that even the notion of human action employed in Patzelt's definition of politics might turn out to be far less clear than it seems on the first glance. However, this leads to long and complex questions of political philosophy, which I do not want to address here.

19 I will have to come back to this statement again in the course of the investigation of Butlers notion of the political subject (chapter six).

20 Diana Coole is a British political scientist. She is currently a professor of Political and Social Theory in the School of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck, University of London.

21 Moya Lloyd is a British political scientist. She is currently a professor of Political Theory in the department of Politics, History and International Relations at Loughborough University.

has for our thinking of crucial concepts "such as agency, power and domination" (Lloyd 2005, 2). Lloyd's book is clearly an attempt to utilize Butlerian insights within the realm of political theory. Her main claim is that a rethinking of the subject and the subsequent reconsideration of the subject-politics-relation does not lead to a dismissal of politics, but to a reconfiguration of politics. It is precisely these opportunities for a reconfiguration of politics through the rethinking of the political subject that the present inquiry also tries to investigate.

Liberal and Postliberal Notions of the Subject

In his introduction to political science, W. Phillips Shively[22] lists "two defining characteristics of politics" which are that "(1) politics always involves the making of common decisions for groups of people *and* (2) those decisions are made by some members of the group exercising power over other members of the group" (Shively 2007, 4). Shively names his introduction "power and choice" because these are the two main characteristics that define politics in his opinion. He, however, shows a clear preference for choice, thought as a common decision everyone can share. That should not come as a surprise, because in this theory power is thought as always being exercised as some form of domination of one individual or group over another. In this view, power is clearly a bad thing and should be as limited as possible, so individuals can develop free from all forms of subordination (Shively 2007, 25).

We should be aware, however, that this point of view presupposes a certain notion of the political subject that can be called liberal. The two main aspects of this notion are, first, that human beings are originally self-sufficient, autonomous individuals that only socialize in a second step. And, second, that all humans have certain intrinsic features and capacities such as rationality and accountability that qualify them as subjects for ethics and politics (Maihofer 1995, 151ff.). If such a liberal notion of the subject is presupposed, then, of course, any kind of subordination is principally bad, because it contradicts the highest good of every liberal society, that is *the ability of the members of that society to develop their individual capacities to the fullest extent*" (Shively 2007, 24). But if we start to ask – as Butler does – what the consequences are in case that subordination is not always a bad thing, but also necessary to the extent that there would not even be a subject without a certain subordination that calls it into existence in first place, then the situation might turn

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22 W. Phillips Shively is an American political scientist. He is currently a professor of Political Science in the department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

out to be much more difficult. We would not only be forced to revise our thinking of the political subject, but also to reconsider our notion of power as a solely repressive and therefore entirely bad thing.[23]

This point of view must be highly provocative to the representative of such a liberal conception, because it seems to be very important for those thinkers – even within a broader spectrum of liberal theory – to defend the core of a liberal notion of the subject. Seyla Benhabib[24], for instance, wrote in an article[25] that there must be some possibility to reformulate the "traditional attributes of the philosophical subject of the West, like self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, rational accountability for one's actions and the ability to project a life-plan into the future, in short some form of autonomy and rationality" (Benhabib 1995a, 20).

In recent years, however, more and more concerns have been formulated about this "Western liberal ideal of autonomy as self-determination" (Thiem 2008, 59). Could it be that the liberal notion of the subject is only one of many historically and culturally contingent ways of conceptualizing the subject? But even without reference to historical and cultural alternatives, it has become doubtful in the minds of several scholars, if "the 'self-sufficient individual' and the 'autonomous will' that serve as the bedrocks and 'fighting concepts' of liberalism" (Thiem 2008, 59) are really our only – and even the most favorable – alternatives for the foundation of ethics and politics. Annika Thiem[26] states that the suspicion about this notion of the subject as an autonomous, rational agent goes even further:

> The subject as an autonomous knowing and acting subject in control of him- or herself has come into question not only because of the theoretical interventions from various intellectual camps, such as psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonial studies. Much more mundanely, our daily experience often make us – sometimes painfully – aware of the limits of our knowledge of and control over ourselves, others, and the situations in which we have to act. […] The individual who can know herself and has the capacity to know the good and just from the bad and unjust, this individual – in collective or individualized form – can no longer function as a backdrop to ethics and politics, if she ever really could (Thiem 2008, 51).

A variety of intellectual camps – Thiem names some of them – share the diagnosis of an insufficiency of the liberal model, which is also supported by our every-day experience. Thus, we can find a broad spectrum of attempts to find alternatives that go beyond the

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23 I will discuss this matter in chapter six of this inquiry.
24 Seyla Benhabib is a Turkish political scientist and philosopher. She is currently the Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy in the department of Political Science at Yale University.
25 This article (Benhabib 1995a) was one of the first encounters with the theory Butler put forward in *Gender Trouble*, and will be further discussed in the following chapter.
26 Annika Thiem is a German philosopher who studied in Germany and the US. She is currently employed at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Villanova University.

scope of the liberal model. Those attempts, however, do not aim to get rid off the achievements of liberalism, the intention is not to go back to some pre-liberal condition. But there is some sense of urgency that liberalism cannot have the final say, that there most be some alternative that goes beyond the limits of liberal accounts.

Butler can clearly be located within these efforts to go beyond the opportunities that liberalism offers. In this way, her theory can be read as a contribution to an ongoing debate. Her work is developed on the basis of the "postliberatory insight" (PLP 17) into the insufficiency of a liberal notion of the subject as autonomous, rational agent. Thus, the aim is to develop notions of the subject which are able to challenge the liberal paradigm. Butler's more specific concern is a concept of the subject that considers it as fundamentally conditioned and subordinated, but nevertheless equipped with a certain, conditioned but nevertheless rather strong agency. What such a concept might look like, and which consequences it might have for political theory will be one of the main research topics for the following inquiry of Butler's notion of the political subject.

3. The Background: The Early Criticism of Butler's Work

In this chapter I want to deal with the reception of Butler's work during the 1990s in order to highlight the main lines of the controversy with and about Butler. I will consider the American reception first, focussing on the debate between Butler and Benhabib in *Feminist Contentions*. This volume, published in 1995 in English and already one year earlier in German translation, displays the debate between Butler, Benhabib, Nancy Fraser[27] and Drucilla Cornell[28] that took place in 1991. Martha Nussbaum's[29] defaming article *The Professor of Parody* will be discussed as a second example of the American reception. In the second subsection, I will continue with a summary of the German-speaking reception, focusing on the contributions of Isabell Lorey[30], Christine Hauskeller[31] and Andrea Maihofer[32].

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27 Nancy Fraser is an American philosopher. She is currently the Henry A. and Louise Loeb Professor of Political and Social Science at The New School.

28 Drucilla Cornell studied philosophy and law. She is currently a professor of Political Science, Comparative Literature, and Women's Studies at Rutgers University.

29 Martha Nussbaum is an American philosopher. She is currently the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago.

30 Isabell Lorey is a German political scientist. Recently, she had guestprofessorships at the University of Vienna and the Humboldt University, Berlin.

31 Christine Hauskeller studied philosophy, sociology and psychoanalysis at the University of Frankfurt. She is currently a senior research fellow in the department of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter.

32 Andrea Maihofer studied philosophy, german studies and educational science in Mainz, Tübingen and Frankfurt. She is currently a professor of gender studies and the chair of the Zentrum Gender Studies at

If the reception of an author or thinker is discursively produced and reproduced – as stated in the introduction – than it is important to know how this reception has taken shape up to this point in order to be able to productively re-write it. Therefore, the image of the established reception of Butler's work presented here is meant to constitute the background for the following elaboration on Butler's political theory. I want to give an overview of the main arguments and concerns of the reception of Butler's work, because it also presents many of the major themes that need to be dealt with in the following inquiry of Butler's notion of the political subject. The alterations and innovations of my reading of Butler hopefully become clearer in contrast to the common interpretations of her work.

Early American Contestation

Chambers and Carver summarize the main theme of the reception of Butler's work very accurately when they write: "Many of Butler's critical readers find something terribly worrisome in her writings, particularly the books from the early 1990s. These critics often give a name to this supposedly troubling dimension of Butler's work; they call it 'the disappearance of the subject' or 'the loss of agency' " (Chambers/Carver 2008, 8).

We can paradigmatically see this tendency already in the first major discussion of Butler's work, which took place in the course of the debate published as *Feminist Contentions*. I want to restrict my discussion on Benhabib's contribution, because I consider it the most significant one (Benhabib 1995a and 1995b). In her first article, Benhabib attacks certain positions labeled as 'postmodern'. In Benhabib's eyes, Butler is a leading representative of such a 'postmodern theory'. Benhabib reinforces her criticism in her second article, where she tries to spell it out in more detail. She writes: "At the core of the disagreement between Butler and myself lie issues of subjectivity, selfhood, and agency" (Benhabib 1995b, 108). Benhabib's concern throughout the whole debate is that Butler does away with these concepts altogether, and she sees in Butler's work a "complete debunking of any concept of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" (Benhabib 1995a, 21). For Benhabib, Butler's position leads to the end of agency, autonomy, and, eventually, politics; what remains is the assumption of a complete determination by discourse, a steady reproduction of the conditions that constitute us. In such a theory, there is clearly no room for alteration and resistance. She wonders, if Butler's "view of the self is adopted, is there any possibility of changing those 'expressions' which constitute us" (Benhabib 1995a, 21)? In Benhabib's reading there is clearly not, and, therefore, she is seriously worried about the dangerous consequences of

the University of Basel.

Butler's theory.

But go a bit deeper into the matter discussed here: What are the specific objections Benhabib has against Butler's theory? What aspects of Butler's account are especially worrisome? First, Benhabib doubts whether "Butler's performative theory" can do justice to the complexity of the constitution of the subject or the self at all and whether she can contribute at least something to a rethinking of a "new configuration of subjectivity" (Benhabib 1995b, 108). Benhabib asserts that "the historical study of the formation of discursive practices of individuality" – this seems to be the way she characterizes Butler's project – cannot explain the processes by which a "human infant […] becomes a distinct self" with certain abilities we attribute to it (Benhabib 1995b, 109). However, one needs to consider with Jessica Benjamin[33] that "the distinction between the subject and the self" – which Benhabib uses here – "is crucial". But one has to critically add that it is problematic that "Benhabib outlines a notion of self that may not be sufficiently distinct from that of the philosophical subject" (Benjamin 1998, 83).[34]

A further suspicion of Benhabib is that Butler's theory of subject constitution remains solely within the realm of language and linguistic practices and that she, therefore, cannot deal with other relevant practices such as "family structures, child-rearing patterns, children's games, children's dress habits, schooling, cultural habitus etc" (Benhabib 1995b, 109). Butler might reply with the following counter questions: Why does Benhabib only consider the socialization and education of children as a matter of subject constitution? Can the theoretical question of subject constitution really be reduced to matters of child-raising? We will see that subject constitution is a very different kind of process than the socialization and education of children.

But the main objection, again, is the suspicion that Butler's theory of the constitution of the subject by discourse leads to a deterministic view of the subject and a loss of agency and autonomy, which makes any form of resistance and change impossible.

> Indeed the question is: how can one be constituted be discourse without being determined by it? A speech-act theory of performative gender constitution cannot give us a sufficiently thick and rich account of gender formation that would also explain the capacities of human agents for self-determination. What is it that enables the self to 'vary' the gender codes such as to resist hegemonic discourses (Benhabib 1995b, 110)?

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33 Jessica Benjamin is an American psychoanalyst. She is currently on the faculty of New York University's Postdoctoral Psychology Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy and of the New School for Social Research's Program in Psychoanalytic Studies. Benjamin's *The Shadow of the Other* includes one of the very few discussions of the Butler-Benhabib-debate (Benjamin 1998, 80ff.). Another discussion of this debate is Webster 2000.

34 The distinction of subject and self remains a relevant question one certainly has to address when dealing with Butler's theory of the political subject; therefore I will revisit this topic in chapter four.

Already the following question, which Benhabib adds, shows that in her view the answer to this question can only be found in an inner capacity of the self: "What psychic, intellectual, or other source of creativity and resistance must we attribute to human subjects for such variations to be possible" (Benhabib 1995b, 110)? It will be shown in this inquiry that the position Benhabib displays here is precisely the point of view which Butler wants to challenge with her analysis of the subject. For Butler, the ability of resistance and change cannot be based on a source internal to the 'self', some intrinsic capacity we have to attribute to the 'human subject'.

The second contestation of Butler's work I want to discuss is Nussbaum's article *The Professor of Parody*.[35] Besides all the polemic, there are also a few arguments in this article worth consideration. Generally speaking, Nussbaum's main question is a remainder of Benhabib's main objection: Where does the ability for agency come from, if not from an inner capacity of the subject? In contrast to Benhabib, Nussbaum admits that Butler intends to think agency, but the question remains for her: "But where does this ability come from, if there is no structure in the personality that is not thoroughly power's creation" (Nussbaum 1999, 8)? In this context, Nussbaum also shares Benhabib's troubles with Butler's concept of subject constitution. She asks: "What does it mean, tell us please, for the agency of the subject to presuppose its own subordination" (Nussbaum 1999, 4)? Nussbaum has to confess that she is not able to find any answer in Butler's texts. The conclusion she draws from her disappointing reading experience is again in line with Benhabib, as she claims that Butler does not "provide any account of the concepts of resistance and oppression" (Nussbaum 1999, 9). Butler's performative theory – once again reinforcing Benhabib's argument – does not allow for any change. In Nussbaum's view, the "reactive and parodic performance" which Butler supports "never destabilizes the larger system"(Nussbaum 1999, 7).

Nussbaum adds a new objection with the allegation that Butler's theory lacks a normative dimension. Nussbaum goes on to show why she thinks this causes serious problems for Butler's theory: "Butler cannot explain in any purely structural or procedural way why the subversion of gender norms is a social good while the subversion of justice norms is a social bad" (Nussbaum 1999, 9). In my opinion, Nussbaum hits a weak spot of Butler's theory here, and therefore one has to take this objection very seriously.[36] The conclusion Nussbaum draws from it, however, is again in line with the general polemic she employs

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35 A critical discussion of this article is offered by Bell 2002.
36 I will come back to this objection in chapters eight and nine.

and does not add a lot to a serious analysis of Butler's theory. She calls Butler out for a "naively empty politics" that can lead to nothing else than a "dangerous quietism" (Nussbaum 1999, 10), basically repeating the headline that Butler is only a "Professor of Parody".

Early German-speaking Reception

As already mentioned in chapter one, the German-speaking reception of Butler was for a long time "lost in a one-sided controversy about the opposition of nature and culture of the *Geschlechter*-difference and the threatening depoliticization of feminist theory" ["in einer einseitigen Auseinandersetzung über den Gegensatz von Natur und Kultur der Geschlechterdifferenz und die drohende Entpolitisierung feministischer Theorie verlor"] (Distelhorst 2009, 15). Butler's politics was reduced to a notion of queer politics, and she was subsequently criticized, because her "politics remains on the level of performative resignifications" ["politische Praxis verleibt auf der Ebene performativer Bezeichnungsverfahren"] (Bublitz 2000, 88).

What reasons for this restricted perspective of the German-speaking reception can be identified? To begin with, the central role of *Gender Trouble* is certainly a very important factor. This book was – and for a large part still is – the main reason for Butler's worldwide fame. Hence, it is not surprising that it has guided the reception of Butler's work. For the German-speaking area, one can state the initial reactions to *Gender Trouble* were for most parts quite hostile. "Without a doubt, these severe reactions have to do with the German-speaking tradition of materialist feminist and gender research in terms of social theory. In the 1980s, this tradition stood at the beginning of a systematic re-formulation of *Geschlecht* as a category of social sciences" ["Ohne Zweifel haben diese heftigen Reaktionen mit der gesellschaftstheoretischen, materialistischen Tradition deutschsprachiger Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung zu tun, die in den 1980er Jahren am Beginn einer systematischen Neu-Formulierung von Geschlecht als sozialwissenschaftlicher Kategorie stand"] (Sauer 2009, 145f.). One has to understand that especially for feminist political science it was crucial to argue against the tendency in mainstream political science to work with a merely functionalist notion of politics. If one goes back to the introductions to political science discussed in the previous chapter one can see how the mainstream positions focus on a notion of politics as a system and work with a solely behavioral notion of political action. Against this tendency it was important for a feminist notion of politics to defend and maintain the concept of political agency (Sauer 2000, 36). In this specific

constellation, *Gender Trouble* was received as a severe threat to this promising development, and, consequently, it had to be repelled. The perception of Butler's theory as a threat to the achievements of feminism and the gender movement was certainly responsible for the one-sided reception of her work, which was almost solely organized around this issue.

Against the predominant reception, I want to suggest that, in fact, Butler and the tradition of German-speaking feminist political science share some common ground in their critique of the mainstream notion of politics. The specific constellation, however, was not really favorable for a reception of Butler's work that allowed to acknowledge this potential alliance.

Another main point of controversy was Butler's challenge of the sex-gender-distinction. In this context, the German-speaking reception was especially concerned with the status of the body. Once again, the controversy was dominated by a very hostile tone. Barbara Duden[37] even went so far that she wrote a very personal article about Butler with the title "Die Frau ohne Unterleib" [The woman without womb] (Duden 1993). These reactions should again be seen against the background of the materialist tradition of German-speaking feminist and gender research. Butler's statement about the constitution of the body had to appear much more provocative to somebody coming from such a materialist tradition.

In addition to this thematic differences, one also has to consider that the language gap might have contributed to the situation. Several of Butler's books were published in German with a significant delay and several of the articles in which Butler evolved her theory have never been translated into German.

In the German-speaking reception we can also observe that the question of the political subject and the ability of resistance and change soon became the main issues. As Hauskeller observed: "The topic subject pervades Butler's texts as the central theme" ["Das Thema Subjekt durchzieht Butlers Texte wie ein roter Faden"] (Hauskeller 2000, 54). Similarly, Lorey summarized the main questions of that debate: Do 'constituted subjects' have agency? Are they in position to change the conditions they are living in? Is radical social change still thinkable if we consider a constituted subject? Or has such a notion of the subject the effect that agency, critique and political action become fundamentally unthinkable (Lorey 1996, 8)? Another common theme in most of the discussions of Butler's work was the focus on the connection between Butler and Foucault. The books

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37 Barbara Duden is a German historian and sociologist. She is currently a professor in the department of Sociology at the University of Hannover.

by Lorey (1996) and Hauskeller (2000) are instances of this tendency. The main approach of these books is, first, to show how Butler misread Foucault with regard to several crucial aspects, and, second, to argue that Foucault's conceptions are superior to Butler's deviating adoption.[38]

Focussing on the content, we can state that the main line of argument is more or less the same as in the case of Benhabib.[39] Hauskeller is worried about Butler's "denial of the connection of subjecthood and the ability to perform resistance" ["Verleugnung des Zusammenhangs von Subjekthaftigkeit und der Fähigkeit, Widerstand zu leisten"] (Hauskeller 2000, 120). She detects a contradiction in Butler's theory, because, on the one hand, Butler wants to deconstruct the subject, but, on the other hand, she employs a concept of resistance that forces her again to assume that it has its origin in the subject (Hauskeller 2000, 141). The conclusion one has to draw from this contradiction is that Butler cannot think resistance after all. The subject is determined by the discourse and the power relations it is formed by and, hence, there is simply no room for alteration (Hauskeller 2000, 149). The result of Hauskeller's investigation into Butler's concept of subject is, "that it is insufficient for a critical, political-practical oriented theory" ["dass dieses nicht für eine kritische, politisch-praktische orientierte Theorie hinreicht"] (Hauskeller 2000, 152).

Lorey's argument sounds slightly different, but she comes more or less to the same conclusion. Her main worry is that Butler limits processes of subject constitution to legal practices and that this restricted view has the effect that for Butler nothing can exist outside of power relations (Lorey 1996, 142). Because no position independent of power relations is possible in Butler's theory, she is forced to explain that the outside is also constructed by the very same power relations, thus leading her to a point of view where she cannot challenge the established power relations, but is compelled to stabilize them again. Because subject constitution is always bound to power relations, and those are ultimately thought as

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38 I have the general suspicion that such an approach is not very productive to begin with; why would one even read Butler, if only to proof that her thought is inferior to somebody else's, who one has already read?

39 It might be surprising to see that the main themes of all these critics are very similar, if we consider that they come from rather different theoretical backgrounds, and it might be of interest to locate these critics. Nussbaum is clearly located within analytic philosophy and American liberalism , and – as has been shown by Loizidou – her harsh criticism can be explained because of this background (Loizidou 2007, 158). Benhabib is also located within an American context, but in contrast to Nussbaum a supporter of discourse ethics and hence foremost influenced by the work of the later Habermas. Hauskeller and Lorey have a more materialistic German-speaking background in the context of a critical theory that opened up for a Foucaultian power analysis. On the other hand, the intriguing similarities of the criticism might also indicate that they are all based on the same basic, liberal assumptions. Maybe it is precisely this common ground that all critics want to defend against Butler's critique.

legal conditions, no challenge of the law is possible (Lorey 1996, 44f.). Hauskeller shares the critique that Butler "is totalizing a certain conception of power" ["totalisiert eine bestimmte Machtkonzeption"] (Hauskeller 2000, 227), and agrees that Butler's conception of power is a solely legal one (Hauskeller 2000, 169 and 213). Thus, Lorey and Hauskeller are not concerned that Butler dismisses categories which are important for progressive politics, on the contrary, they are worried that she sticks with the established, hegemonic categories, and offers no way of challenging them (Lorey 1996, 139). In such a conception, the subject can only be thought as subjected (Lorey 1996, 140), and subject constitution is always a solely heteronomous determination (Hauskeller 2000, 215). This mono-causal logic of subject constitution, Hauskeller concludes, allows for no resistance and makes agency effectively impossible (Hauskeller 2000, 250).

Another consequence of this reading of Butler is that any conception of historicity is impossible, as Lorey points out (Lorey 1996, 36). Butler's research is located on a structural, but entirely ahistorical level, making any consideration of concrete power relations unnecessary and implausible (Lorey 1996, 116). Butler does not consider any concrete agents, she always stays with the subject, which is always already a subjected, that means determined, one (Lorey 1996, 118). Due to all those problems, we have to conclude that her conception of subversion is terribly weak (Lorey 1996, 45).

Already one year earlier than the publication of Lorey's book, Maihofer released a book that included an interpretation of Butler that suggests that the image of Butler's theory, which Lorey and Hauskeller are presenting, is overly simplistic. In her reading of Butler, it turns out to be very clear that gender is conceptualized as "the effect of a discursive praxis that is historically specified" ["Effekt einer historisch bestimmten diskursiven Praxis"] (Maihofer 1995, 46). Thus, according to Maihofer Butler insists on the historical contingency of gender norms, and she makes clear that Butler's concepts of parody and resignification have to be seen within that context (Maihofer 1995, 42). Maihofer was thereby maybe the first one to see the key role that *denaturalization* plays in Butler's theory.[40] Maihofer still criticizes Butler, because she thinks that her analysis remains solely on a synchronic level and does not include diachronic dimensions, while being very clear that Butler in no way supports a theory that is ahistorical (Maihofer 1995, 47). Formulated in this way, her critique is much more profound than Lorey's simplistic suspicion of ahistoricity,and definitely requires serious attention.

The final concern I want to mention deals with Butler's link of speech and action (Lorey

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40 I will come back to this matter in chapter five.

1996, 141). This is once again a concern we have already seen in Benhabib. Hauskeller detects a one-sided location of of all constitutional processes and all abilities for alteration and change within language (Hauskeller 2000, 50). Consequently, that leads to a view in which language supposedly remains the only means of change Butler can consider. Hauskeller even goes as far as to claim that "Butler accepts only language as means of change and denies the effectiveness of non-discursive means" ["Butler läßt nur die Sprache als Mittel der Veränderung gelten und bestreitet die Effektivität nicht-diskursiver Mittel"] (Hauskeller 200, 115). This is already a very questionable statement, but Lorey takes it even one step further, arguing that for Butler, ultimately, there exists no difference between speech and action at all: "words are actions" (Lorey 1996, 115). In Lorey's defense one has to say that her interpretation had been written before Butler's *Excitable Speech* was published, a book in which Butler investigates into the performative force of language and specifies the connections and differences between discursive and non-discursive practices. While unknown to Lorey, one certainly needs to consider the remarks on language in *Excitable Speech* when dealing with Butler's theory.

In this context, I want to suggest that one of the main problems with Lorey's and Hauskeller's reading of Butler is that they are presupposing a certain theory of language, which is certainly not the same as the one Butler supports. Maihofer was more careful in this respect, clearly noticing that one needs to consider that Butler is employing a certain notion of language. That allows her to formulate her concern in a more appropriate and cautious way (Maihofer 1995, 47).[41]

Summary

To sum up this short survey of the reception of Butler's work, I want to bring together the main objections and concerns that appeared in the American and the German-speaking context.

It can be stated that the question of the political subject has been a focal point of the controversy about Butler's work already from the beginning. The main suspicion was that Butler cannot think the political subject and that her work therefore cannot attribute anything to a theory of politics, but rather that she puts any effort in this direction in jeop-

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41 Maihofer's concern that Butler might after all be in danger of supporting a "semiotic idealism" (Maihofer 1995, 47) is formulated in a very plausible way and would be worth further investigation. Unfortunately I cannot deal with this issue in this inquiry. Hauskeller's reading of *Bodies that matter*, which is maybe the best part of her book, should also be mentioned in this context (Hauskeller 2000, 97ff.). To prevent further misreadings of Butler's texts – but also of my own inquiry – I will try to bring some light into the conception of language at work in Butler's texts in chapter five.

ardy. In particular, the concern was that Butler could not offer any conception of agency, and, similarly, that she could not explain political action at all. Based on that interpretation, the additional suspicion was that she was ultimately unable to explain any kind of alteration and resistance, and thereby made any notion of change implausible. Another concern was that Butler reduced everything to linguistic practices. It does not matter whether we speak about the body, relations of power and domination, or political action, the suspicion was that those 'actual' 'facts' – that are certainly and rightfully very important to theorists working in a variety of disciplines – are all considered to be merely linguistic phenomena in Butler's work. As a consequence, readers were frightened that they would lose track of 'real' bodies, 'real' power relations and so forth when complying with Butler's theory. In the case of Lorey and Hauskeller, we found the additional objection that Butler's theory is ahistorical, and, in correspondence with it, that her conception of power was monolithic, mono-causal, and did not allow for the analysis of concrete situations and relations. As a consequence of all those tendencies, the view on Butler's notion of politics – assumed that she was even granted to have something like that – was very limited.

In the course of this inquiry, I want to show that these objections and concerns are for the most part based on a misinformed reading of Butler's texts. That does not mean that I suggest that we should adopt an uncritical attitude towards Butler's work. Quite the contrary, such a critical approach is, indeed, necessary in order to evaluate what Butler's theory can and cannot accomplish. Such an evaluation is certainly the purpose of this inquiry.

Part 2: Butler's Conception of the Political Subject

This part will discuss the subject as a category of political theory. The aim is the reintroduction of the subject into the realm of politics and the resignification of the subject as a major political concern. Whereas the subject has traditionally been seen as prior to politics, Butler reveals that the claim that the subject is beyond the scope of political analysis and contestation is, in fact, the result of a political strategy of naturalization that intends to immunize a specific conception of the subject against political contestation. In this context, Butler shows that the foundations of politics are themselves political. Whenever something is claimed to be beyond the realm of politics, we need to ask critically about the naturalization processes at work in making that claim. Butler highlights the importance of a strategy of denaturalization, which implies a deconstruction of naturalness and a genealogy of

naturalization processes. The result is a project of radical repoliticization, and in this context we have to contextualize the reintroduction of the subject into politics.

Especially in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler offers an analysis of processes of subjection, which reveals the relation of subject and power. Power and subject are linked together in the process of subjection. This link of power and subject makes an expansion of the scope of analyses of power possible, which can no longer solely focus on the power that is enforced by one subject on another, but which also need to take into consideration the power that is at work in the constitution of those very subjects. In this context, the present inquiry suggests reading Butler's notion of subjection in the light of a theory of hegemony. This enables us to appreciate Butler's notion of normative violence, that means the violence enforced by the norms that regulate the processes of subjection and the possible subject positions. Butler especially focuses on the precarious status of those that cannot confirm with the norms and are, therefore, banned from the realm of intelligible life. This will confront us with the question of the conceptualization of the outside in Butler's theory.

4. Contextualizing Butler's Question about the Political Subject

This chapter begins with an outline of the scope of Butler's account of the subject. It especially deals with the following questions: Why and in which way can we state that her analysis of the subject is an investigation into the *political* subject? How is an account of the political subject located within a wider field of theories about subjectivity and the self? What are the consequences of raising the question about the subject explicitly as a question about the political subject?

Two Notions of the Subject

As a starting point, I want to refer to an entry on 'subject', which Butler composed for a compendium on political and social philosophy (SUB). In this text, Butler points out that there were two distinct traditions in which the term 'subject' was used. Firstly, 'subject' was used in a metaphysical sense in which it meant the ultimate foundation for a set of attributes, which are thought as following in a second step. In this sense it was either identified with Descartes' *res cogitans* or with the protagonist in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Secondly, 'subject' was employed in a political sense, in which the status of the subject was theorized as empowered and subjected at the same time. In this context, being a subject meant being subjected to a sovereign power or a government. Butler names

Hobbes and Foucault as representatives of this second tradition. The existence of these distinct traditions poses the question, how the two are interrelated. Is the political subject dependent on the metaphysical subject? Or is the metaphysical subject, on the contrary, bound to the history of the subject in the political sense (SUB 1302f.)?

In recent years, Butler continues, we can observe a turning away form traditional conceptualizations of the subject. In this context, Butler refers once again to Foucault and explains that Foucault's critique was not directed towards the subject itself, but rather against certain notions of the subject. In his critique of traditional notions of the subject, he especially opposes the distinction between epistemological and political theories of the subject. In Foucault's view not only the political, but also what is said to be the epistemological or metaphysical subject cannot be separated from its subjection under a certain regime of power (SUB 1303f.). Butler also links Nietzsche's famous thesis that there is 'no doer behind the deed' to that critique of the notion of a metaphysical subject. In Butler's reading, Nietzsche wants to point out that the subject has to be constituted in the first place and that it therefore has to deal with a history of its formation, which it can never be fully aware of (SUB 1305).

Butler, however, does not say that we can or should completely abandon the notion of the subject. Quite on the contrary, she argues that we need an adequate theory of the subject that can serve for critical analysis. In this article, Butler goes on to defend a conception of the subject which is linked to a certain reading of Hegel. Hegel was conventionally criticized, because he supposedly based his theory of the subject on a hypostatization that was in line with the metaphysical tradition. Against this line of reception, Butler argues that Hegel supports an 'ec-static' conception of the subject, which is not at all a self-identical foundation, but rather develops through the process of its interrelation with alterity (SUB1304).[42]

Butler's goal seems to be to open up opportunities for new conceptions of subjectivity,

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[42] Butler's reading of Hegel dates back to her student years and already crystallized in her dissertation *Subjects of Desire*. In the volume *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, which displays a dialogue of Butler with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek the diverging reception of Hegel is one main aspect of disagreement between Laclau and Butler, who in that respect is supported by Žižek – whereas for the rest of the book, Laclau and Butler share the same opinions most of the time while considerably disagreeing with Žižek. In this thesis I will not be able to address Butler's reception of Hegel. When dealing with that topic one also has to raise the question what it eventually means to present a reading of a classic like Hegel and what the main purpose of such a reading is and should be. Is it the goal to give an account of the intention of the author that is as adequate as possible? Is it even possible to give such an account? How can the intention of an author be determined? Who has the authority to decide on that determination? Are other readings also possible and legal? Could it even be that a misreading of a classic can be productive, as it opens new perspectives? Is there something like a practice of productive misreading?

which do not need to be grounded on the notion of a metaphysical subject. Butler argues in that line of thought when she states that Foucault's writings should be seen less as a critique of the subject, but rather as the promotion of new modes of subjectivity (SUB 1302). The question, which Butler is concerned with, is to establish notions of the political subject that are not based on a metaphysical foundation and cannot be reduced to an isolated first-person perspective, but rather have to take into account the primary relations of the subject with others (SUB 1306).

The Subject Versus the Self

The discussed article is of some interest, because, on the one hand, it gives some insights into Butler's view about a broader and more general philosophical inquiry of subjectivity and selfhood, and, on the other hand, it was written for a compendium on political and social philosophy, so it is located within the discipline the present inquiry also wants to focus on. Additionally, it is a relatively recent text that gives an insight into Butler's current point of view. Butler seems to have been dealing with wider questions about subjectivity and selfhood more and more in recent years – at least since *Undoing Gender* and *Giving an Account of Oneself*. In her writings of the 1990s, in contrast, Butler usually does not deal with these wider contexts, but focuses on a rather narrow question. This restricted concern can especially be seen in *Gender Trouble*, where Butler explicitly clarifies the redefined scope of her account:

> Within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of 'the person' has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is 'in' remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood, be that consciousness, the capacity for language, or moral deliberation (GT 22f.).

Butler wants to avoid an investigation into the subject that is based on the assumption of some internal features. Instead, she shifts the focus of her investigation:

> Whereas the question of what constitutes 'personal identity' within philosophical accounts almost always centers on the question of what internal features of the person establishes the continuity of self-identity of the person through time, the question here will be: To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience (GT 23)?

In comparison to those traditional accounts, Butler's starting point is already based on a significant relocation of the main questions. In order to comprehend this move, one has to distinguish between the different levels an inquiry might be concerned with. Therefore I suggest distinguishing the conception of the 'subject' from a notion of the 'self'. The meaning of the term 'self' is not clear either, as there is a dispute among scholars about the

requirements to count as a self. In a minimal sense, the 'self' could describe what one might call mineness – Heidegger's *Jemeinigkeit* –, the fact that my life is *mine*, my experience is *mine*, this kind of first-person-givenness. As the phenomenological tradition has shown, mineness does not presuppose a notion of the 'subject', nor does it imply the reference to an 'I'; it is certainly not a Kantian 'I think' (Heidegger 2001, 42 and 316ff.). But in the opinion of most scholars, to be a self implies more then only mineness, even though it can certainly not be thought independent of it. To sum up, we can state that there are multiple levels of selfhood that can be distinguished, all based on some kind of mineness, and the solution might be to adopt a multi-dimensional account of the self, corresponding to those different levels (Zahavi 2009).

However, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes it clear that she does not want to investigate into those philosophical aspects of a theory of the self. Therefore, I think that it would be a mistake to read Butler's work as a coherent and comprehensive account of the self, which is supposed to include all traditional features of such a theory, and to judge her theory according to those criteria. Furthermore, I think that it would also be wrong to even demand Butler to have an opinion on all those aspects, which a comprehensive discussion of the self might have to include. No theory can cover everything, and consequently we have to take into account that there are questions that are simply not within Butler's area of concern – even though they might be of great interest. This is especially the case with *Gender Trouble,* which should certainly not be read as Butler's final word on a theory of the self. One has to keep in mind that *Gender Trouble* – even though it was a highly profound, provocative and radical book that rightfully has had a major impact on contemporary thinking of subjectivity – in fact had a rather narrow point of departure within a theory of gender.[43] In a rejoinder to Benhabib's critique, Butler is very clear about this point: "Indeed, if I were to offer a 'theory of the self,' which I do not, it would not be reducible to a theory of gender" (CR 133).[44] Thus, at least for Butler's early work we can state

43 Therefore it is misleading, when Hauskeller criticizes that Butler is overestimating the importance of sexuality for the constitution of the subject (Hauskeller 2000, 273). Butler does not claim that the sexual is the only institution of subject formation, she does not even claim that it is the most important. Quite on the contrary, she is insisting that the constitution of the subject and its identity has to be considered along a variety of axis. It is simply the focus of the book *Gender Trouble* that requires that she is dealing with specific instances of "such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality" (GT xxxi). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler raises the question how gender interacts with other axis of subject formation such as race. Her point seems to be that those axis cannot be considered separately from each other, except for the purpose of theoretical research that is based on an abstraction. Butler, however, does not go on to investigate into the details of those interactions among axis of subject formation and it is therefore not possible to consider her account in more detail (BM 117).

44 I want to point out that there is a crucial mistake in the German translation of this sentence. This is of major importance, because this article was first published in German. The German reads: "Würde ich in der Tat eine 'Theorie des Selbst' anbieten – was ich nicht tue –, dann wäre sie reduzierbar auf eine

that it was not her intent to offer 'a theory of the self'. Hence, it is kind of odd to criticize Butler for not having a theory of the self, because, on the one hand, it is even in Butler's own opinion a correct statement that she does not provide such a theory, but, on the other hand, that cannot really be an objection against her theory, because Butler nowhere claims to offer such a theory, but rather explicitly refuses even to deal with the question of the self in such a broad way.

I think that this differentiation has often been overlooked in the reception of Butler's early work and caused some confusion. Lorey, for instance, criticizes Butler for lacking a theory of the self. Her own solution is an existentialist model of self-crafting in which the self-constitution of the subject as a self-relation has to be taken into account (Lorey 1996, 152ff.). First of all, one can respond that Lorey's objection clearly shows that she does not go along with Butlers shift of focus. Second, one might wonder if Lorey is not again employing a notion of personhood – even though conceptualized as a process of becoming – that Butler wants to avoid in her analysis. In *Gender Trouble,* Butler writes that "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytical features of person-hood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (GT 23). This passage should also be read against the background of the shift in focus towards a theory of the political subject. Butler's point seems to be that an investigation into something like the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of a 'person' is always already a question about identity. And she furthermore seems to indicate that a question about identity is a social question all along. The fact that these features of the self are 'socially instituted and maintained' then indicates that they are always already social in nature.

However, this critique can be reformulated in a way that entails that the reference to Butler's shift in focus is no longer enough to reject the objection. In *Shadow of the Other,* Benjamin presents such a critical evaluation of Butler's account, focusing on the restrictions it is based on and what problems these may cause. I will not give a full account of Benjamin's evaluation, but only deal with Benjamin's contribution to the matter discussed in this chapter. Benjamin declares clearly that "identity is not self. Self is a category distinct from that of identity" (Benjamin 1998, 87). And she concludes that "the critique of identity does not prevent us from postulating a psychic subjectivity" (Benjamin 1998, 87). From that perspective Benjamin can highlight the problematic aspect of Butler's restricted point of departure. Her suspicion is that "Butler collapses self and subject, as if political,

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Theorie des Gender." There is obviously a "nicht" missing in the last part of the sentence. This mistake completely alters the sentence, which then in German means exactly the opposite of which was originally said in English.

epistemological positions, such as the 'identity' of women as a unified political subject, fully correspond to a psychological concept of the self" (Benjamin 1998, 85). When doing so, Butler "misses the psychoanalytic concept of self" (Benjamin 1998, 87). Benjamin asks for a theory of the self that, first, takes into account the encounter of the self with alterity, and, second, also untangles how this encounter goes hand in hand with a process of recognition. She, at least implicitly, comments that Butler seems to lack a position about those matters.

But is this in fact the case? Is Benjamin right with her suspicion that Butler abolishes a notion of the self that can take into account the relation with otherness and processes of recognition by reducing these aspects to a matter of political identity? It seems to be the case that Butler adopts the criticized point of view at least in some of her most famous works of the 1990s, precisely those works which are also the primary focus of the present inquiry. However, if we take an overview of Butler's oeuvre, we can also see that she was, at least at some points, clearly concerned with those questions. In "Longing for Recognition", which is published in *Undoing Gender*, Butler offers a reply to Benjamin's critique, and it turns out that she agrees with Benjamin for most parts. The questions which Benjamin raises, clearly begin to play a bigger role in Butler's more recent writings, where she deals with theories of recognition and gives an account of human vulnerability based on their bodily being in the world (PL). A further investigation into these issues would need to take Butler's intellectual point of departure in certain traditions of continental philosophy into consideration, especially her reading of Hegel through the lens of French Hegelianism (recognition) and her contact with a existentialist interpretation of Phenomenology (*Leiblichkeit* and vulnerability).

Overall, if we consider Butler's more recent texts, we can clearly see that she is dealing with such wider questions about the self and it is therefore obvious that she does not object to those investigations in general.[45] However, if we stay with Butler's works from *Gender Trouble* to *The Psychic Life of Power,* the question still remains if the theory she presents in those texts radically contradicts philosophical investigations into the notion of selfhood, or if her remarks can be integrated into such a wider field of research. The stance defended in the present inquiry is the following: If Butler were to believe that the account of the subject she presents covers everything there is to say about a theory of the self – and the clarifica-

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45 I will widely ignore this fact for the first eight chapters of this inquiry, focussing on the notion of the subject Butler uses in her writings of the 1990s. However, beginning with chapter nine, I will evaluate the shift in Butler's account from a critical genealogy of the subject to a more psychologically grounded notion of the self.

tion in *Contingent Foundations* quoted above clearly indicates that she is not – then it would be a significant shortcoming of her theory. But if she is clear about the restricted focus of her theory, then her investigation into the subject and identity can stand on its own as an important contribution in this respect.

The present inquiry will follow Butler's shift of research interest, and work with the specific notion of the subject that Butler employs in her works at least from *Gender Trouble* to *The Psychic Life of Power*. Therefore, it is required to make explicit that this inquiry will exclude philosophical questions about subjectivity and the self. Thus, Butler will not be defended as a theorist of subjectivity or the self. Instead, the aim is to investigate into her theory of the subject, which is marked as a theory of the political subject, and make clear how this is an important contribution to political theory.

The Subject as a Critical Category

The present inquiry wants to focus on Butler's conception of the political subject. But what does the term 'subject' mean in this context? What are the distinguishing features of Butler's notion of the subject? In particular, what does it indicate to label the subject discussed here as a *political* one? In a famous passage from *The Psychic Life of Power,* Butler points out that we should be clear about what is meant when referring to the subject:

> 'The subject' is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with 'the person' or 'the individual.' The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site'), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency (PLP 10f.).

Whereas in everyday language we use the term 'subject' more or less interchangeable with other terms such as 'person' or 'individual', Butler suggests that we should employ 'subject' in a technical sense as a critical category of social theory.

With that definition, Butler, interestingly enough, is in line with Ernesto Laclau[46] and Chantal Mouffe's[47] use of the term subject in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.* Laclau and Mouffe point out that the question of the subject has to deal with two distinct problems that need to be distinguished: First, "the problem of the discursive or pre-discursive character of the category of the subject"; second, "the problem of the relationship among different

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46 Ernesto Laclau is an Argentinian political theorist. He is currently a professor of Political Theory at the University of Essex.
47 Chantal Mouffe is a Belgian political theorist. She is a professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Westminster.

subject positions" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 114f.). Concerning the first problem they refer to the critique of classic conceptions of the subject, which they say had "three conceptual targets: the view of the subject as agent both rational and transparent to itself; the supposed unity and homogeneity of the ensemble of its positions; and the conception of the subject as origin and basis of social relations" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 115). In Laclau and Mouffe's view, these critiques are already well known so that they do not need refer to them in detail. Anyway, there is no doubt about their general position concerning the first question and they can, thus, give the following definition: "Whenever we use the category of 'subject' in this text, we will do so in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure" (Laclau/Mouffe, 2001 115). For Laclau and Mouffe, subjects are neither fully rational nor transparent to themselves, their unity and homogeneity cannot be presupposed and they are certainly not the origin of social relations. The subject has to be investigated in its embedding into discursive formations and, therefore, the second problem, the question of the relation of different subject position, becomes the major concern.[48]

To sum up, in Butler's texts of the 1990s – similar to the move exhibited by Laclau and Mouffe – 'subject' is used in a terminologically fixed sense as a category that names a site within a discursive structure. It is thereby not the same as an individual, rather it is the placeholder that allows individuals to achieve a place within this structure by occupying the site of the subject. The fact that Butler also describes the subject as a linguistic category led to the common critique that she is reducing the complex structure of the subject purely to a scene in language. The next chapter will offer an inquiry into the notion of language that is in the background of Butler's conception in order to show that this critique is based on the fact that Butler works with a different notion of language than most of her critics do. Still, the question remains how to think the relation of the 'subject' and the 'individual'. If these terms are not the same, but rather have to be strictly distinguished, what then is the connection between them? An answer could be to say that they are simply located on different levels; parallel to the distinction of subject and self, Butler simply locates the notion of the subject on a specific level relevant to her theory and excludes other levels and possible approaches from her analysis. This, however, is not a very satisfying answer. That is why it is necessary to present a further argument that might run as follows: If we refer to an 'individual', it is necessarily a reference within language. But if the reference takes

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48 One has to consider, however, that Laclau's notion of the subject has shifted since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and moved closer to a Lacanian notion of the subject as lack and negativity (Distelhorst 2007, 86). Butler appears to be rather critical about this shift, because in her eyes it implies a certain unjustified resubstantialization (RU and CU).

place within language, we are not anymore referring to the individual, instead, we are already dealing with the linguistic category of the 'subject'. As a conclusion, it might turn out that we cannot refer to the 'individual', because the 'individual' only becomes intelligible by occupying the position of the 'subject' within a linguistic structure. As Butler writes: "Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects" (PLP 11). The reason is that "it makes little sense to treat 'the individual' as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligibility by becoming subjects" (PLP 11).

The same line of thought is repeated in *Bodies that Matter* when Butler writes about "the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation" and continues: "The 'I' is thus a citation of the place of the 'I' in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceed me, but without which I cannot speak" (BM 226). So even if I say 'I', I cannot base my speaking on the notion of an 'I' existing prior to language. There is no simple reference to an 'I' possible on which I could base my use of this pronoun. Instead, my capacity to use the term 'I' is based on the possibilities that language offers to occupy the site of this pronoun within a historically variable linguistic structure.

The shift in perspective of Butler's account of the subject allows for new fields of research. Butler wants to investigate the discursive formations that enable individuals to occupy the site of a subject, which opens up their opportunity to raise their voices. It is the investigation into the location and formation of these sites that her investigation of the subject focuses on. Butler indicates that the task of social theory is to work on a genealogy of subject formation and the discursive structure in which it takes place. She calls for a "critical evaluation of subject formation", which requires two things: First, "a suspension of the 'I' in the interest of an analysis of subject formation", but then, second, also "a reassumption of the first-person perspective" which "is compelled by the question of agency" (PLP 29). Thus, Butler's theoretical strategy does not want to do away with the subject. Rather, it is meant to enable us to ask questions about the constitution of subjects within a social structure. It is supposed to sharpen our awareness for different modes of subject formation. Thereby Butler establishes the research design for a "critical analysis of subjection", and she mentions three main topics such research involves: First, "an account of the way regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination"; second, an investigation into the limits of subject formation, which she locates in a certain "melancholia"; and third, "an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and

transforming the social term by which it is spawned" (PLP 29).

Even though Butler's elaborations, which have been discussed in this chapter, are quite abstract, the main critical argument of her theory is rather simple. Whereas the subject was traditionally seen as a metaphysical category, which was prior and outside of political analysis – and, hence, no concern for political science – Butler – with reference to this other, political tradition of the term, which is bound with the names Hobbes and Foucault – tries to reinvoke the term as a political category. If subject is understood as a political category, it no longer needs to be seen as a given. Rather, it allows for the critical analysis of the process of subjection and the critical evaluation of subject formation. Thus, the subject is not prior or outside of the realm of politics, but the constitution of the subject turns out to be a major political concern. In addition, the critical analysis of subject formation is – as will be discussed at length in the following chapter – always an analysis of the relations of power at work in this formation. In this sense, the subject – now understood as a political category – can function as a new starting point for a critical political theory.

5. Denaturalization and Genealogy

Butler's contribution to the discussion in *Feminist Contentions* can serve as an important clarification of her position in several crucial aspects. She argues that traditionally it has been presupposed that "any theory of politics requires a subject, needs from the start to presume its subject, the referentiality of language, the integrity of the institutional descriptions it provides. For politics is unthinkable without a foundation, without these premises" (CF 35f.). It is exactly this presupposition that Butler wants to put into question. Is it really true that politics is unthinkable without these premises? Butler employs a twofold strategy to contest this traditional foundation of politics. First, she rejects every single of these premises separately. Second, she suggests that these premises do not provide a necessary precondition for politics in general, but rather "secure a contingent formation of politics that requires that these notions remain unproblematized features of its own definition" (CF 36). So it could be "that a specific version of politics is shown in its contingency once those premises are problematically thematized" (CF 36). In order to support Butler's second strategy, which apparently has to be counterintuitive for someone who is grounded within the traditional notion of politics, it is necessary to take a closer look at Butler's first strategy, that is, her challenges of those premises that serve as the foundation of that notion of politics, which she wants to overcome. In other words, we need to examine how those premises are challenged in order to contest them as foundations of a notion of politics,

which presents itself as the only possible notion, but might turn out to be only one contingent version of politics among others.

Language and Referentiality

This chapter will focus on the first and second premises and leave the third one, which is focused on institutional descriptions, aside. First, the second premise which claims that there is a 'referentiality of language' will be discussed. Then, the inquiry will come back to the first premise, which deals with the question of the subject. The embedding of Butler`s thought within an elaborate and very complex theory of language has often been overlooked, which has lead to several crucial misreadings of her work. This is also due to the fact that Butler is very reluctant about making her theory of language explicit. However, as Anna-Lisa Müller[49] pointed out recently, Butler's notion of language is crucial for her theory, and, additionally, it can be stated that there is also a continuity in Butler's account of language throughout all her works (Müller 2009, 126).

This chapter will only present a short outline of Butler's contesting of classic conceptions of language that are based around the notion of referentiality. Butler is attached to a tradition of philosophy of language that puts the referentiality of language radically into question. Foucault's notion of discourse, Austin's theory of performative speech (Austin 1975), Derrida's reading of Austin (Derrida 1988), and the poststructuralist critique of Saussure's structuralist theory of language (Derrida 1983) are specifically important for Butler in this respect.[50] What is the view of language, of which Butler – following these predecessors – is convinced that it needs to be criticized and overcome?

If we consider the classic notion of the semiotic triangle, which dates all the way back to ancient philosophy, the belief was that a word or symbol evoked a thought or reference and that the thought or reference again referred to an object or referent. Via these relations it is possible that a word (in language) stands for an object (external to language). Describing the relation the other way round, we can say that an external object is in a first step represented by an internal thought and that this thought is then, in a second step, symbolized or represented by a symbol or word. In this conception of language it seems to be natural and self-evident that a word – via these relations of representation – refers to some external

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50 There is not one text where Butler deals extensively with a philosophy of language, but there are several text in which she deals with the topic. Several such passages will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Additionally, the discussion of performativity and iterability in chapter eight will begin with a brief discussion of the influences mentioned here.

object. It appears guaranteed that there are 'real' things we can relate to, which in a subordinated step can be symbolized in language. Thus, language can be defined as a mere description of the 'real' world. In that understanding, the term 'women' – to take Butler's famous example – seems to necessarily refer to certain individuals, which have specific attributes that exist independently of language and allow us to distinguish those individuals from others. The term 'women' appears to be the representation in language for this fixed group of individuals.

What are the reasons that this view of language turned out to be insufficient in the opinion of – in fact – most 20th century philosophers and linguists? What is problematic about this view? In which way does it need to be corrected? First of all, we have to be aware that this conception implies quite a complicated procedure, which includes several identifications. To use the same example, the term 'women' needs to be identified with certain attributes that describe the group the term refers to and those attributes again must be identified with certain individuals. But how are those identifications to be guaranteed? Are they distinct and unequivocal or do they allow for variation? The suspicion is that neither the attributes nor the individuals in question can be found separated from these operations of identification. Individuals are only identified and represented as this or that through processes of identification. And these are processes 'within' language that are not once and for ever fixed, but open for constant alteration. In other words, those identifications can be contested and are permanently under contention. To turn again to the example of 'women', there is not something like a 'real' woman that merely needs to be represented by the term 'woman'. Rather, what the term 'women' represents, that means, what rightfully can be identified with that category, is constituted precisely through the operation of identification.

That does certainly not mean that everything is reducible to language, as the suspicion might be. This conception of language does not assert that there is nothing outside of language. Still, what it denies is that this so called 'outside' is something pregiven, independent from language that only needs to be represented in language subsequently. The main insight is that everything that is given to us, our experience and the intelligibility of the objects experienced, is constituted in and through language. Consequently, there is no 'real' world 'independent' of language. There certainly is still a 'real' 'outside', but this outside is always already experienced in and though the structuring and articulation of language. To fix something outside of language is an operation within language. In *Contingent Foundations* Butler gives two instances of the consequences of this understanding of

language. First, she refers to the body:

> If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all: on the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act produces the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification (CF 57 (13)).

Here, Butler describes precisely how language has to be reconsidered as not merely representational, but rather as productive in the sense that it does not simply describe something given as prior – for instance a body – but constitutes and structures it through the process of signification. Butler's formulation that signification "produces" what it signifies is certainly too strong, and can easily cause misinterpretations. What is meant here is not a creation in a material sense, the productive dimension of language can certainly not be thought in analogy with the production of a craftsman.

Butler's intention becomes clearer in the second example, where Butler once again talks about the category 'women': "In a sense, what women signify has been taken for granted for too long, and what has been fixed as the 'referent' of the term has been 'fixed', normalized, immobilized, paralyzed in position of subordination" (CF 50). We can see that Butler's main critical point is that the referent has traditionally been mistaken for being something fixed. She claims that we cannot refer to a fixed referent, instead, we need to consider the operations by which the referent gets 'fixed'. And Butler goes even further: "In effect, the signified has been conflated with the referent, whereby a set of meanings have been taken to inhere in the real nature of women themselves" (CF 50).[51] Butler wants

51 Butler confronts her reader here with a host of difficult terminology without explaining it or making the origin explicit. In this instance, she uses structuralist vocabulary in the succession of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. For Saussure a sign, which is the basic unit of language, consist of the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the meaning). Saussure's innovative point is that both the signifier and the signified can vary (it does, for example, not matter if we say 'tree', 'Baum' or 'arbor') and that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. The meaning of a sign is therefore – in both aspects –not stable in itself, but constituted only by its differences from and relationships with other signs. Furthermore, the meaning of a sign is neither determined by the intention of an utterer, nor by the reference to an object external to these relations (a referent). That implies, that for the determination of the meaning of a sign no referent is needed, the meaning of a sign is merely constituted within a system of signs, that is language (Saussure 2001).
In the case of Saussure, language is conceptualized as a closed system and the meaning of signs is therefore considered as relatively fixed. The poststructuralist critique mainly disputes this notion of language as a closed system and insists on the openness of the system and the permanent alteration. Butler summarizes this critique in *Gender Trouble*: "The *totality* and *closure* of language is both presumed and contested within structuralism. Although Saussure understands the relationship of signifier and signified to be arbitrary, he places this arbitrary relation within a necessarily complete linguistic system. All linguistic terms presuppose a linguistic totality of structures, the entirety of which is presupposed and implicitly recalled for any one term to bear meaning. This quasi-Leibnizian view, in which language figures as a systematic totality, effectively suppresses the moment of difference between signifier and signified, relating and unifying that moment of arbitrariness within a totalizing field. The poststructuralist break with Saussure and with the identitarian structures of exchange found in Lévi-Strauss refutes the claim of totality and universality and the presumption of binary structural oppositions that implicitly operate to quell the insistent ambiguity and openness of linguistic and cultural signification. As a result, the discrepancy

to contest precisely this notion of 'real nature'. She puts specific emphasis on the aspect that language is "never merely descriptive, but always normative" (CF 50). "For if the term permits of resignification, if its referent is not fixed, then possibilities for new configurations of the term become possible" (CF 50). When considering this notion of language, it is important to see that for Butler this is not merely a possibility within language, but has significant impacts on political opportunities: "To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignification is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency" (CF 50).

It might seem unnecessary or even out of place to discuss Butler's theory of language to such an extent, but I want to suggest that it is not. First, several misreadings of Butler's concepts seem to be related to a misunderstanding or neglect of the notion of language it is based on. Benhabib, for instance, transfers in her critique a very narrow and solely descriptive conception of language, that additionally presupposes an overly sharp distinction between linguistic and other practices, onto Butler. That results in a misreading of several crucial Butlerian concepts such as discourse, power or norm (Benhabib 1995b, 109). Second, it has to be taken into account that Butler establishes a very tight link between language and politics already in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, when she refers to "representation" that ,on the one hand, "serves as the operative term within a political process" and, on the other hand, "is the normative function of a language" (GT 2). Butler makes immediately clear that these two aspects cannot be separated – especially when considering an identity category such as 'women'. The excursus into Butler's theory of language enables us to comprehend this interrelation of linguistic and political representation. In the same way as in the case of linguistic representation, political representation cannot be based on a pregiven referent. Political representation functions not like a mere description of preexisting identities. On the contrary, representation is always normative, and in and through the act of representation it signifies and resignifies the identities it supposes to represent. The fact that neither linguistic nor political representation can be based on a pregiven referent is precisely what opens up new opportunity for political resig-

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between signifier and signified becomes the operative and limitness *differánce* of language, rendering all referentially into a potentially limitless displacement" (GT 54). In this passage, Butler is basically reassembling Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure (Derrida 1983) ending with a direct reference to *differánce*, a quasi-concept introduced by Derrida as a consequence of his deconstruction of structuralism. Against the background of those elaborate theoretical engagements, Butler can give a very brief notion of her concept of language: "Abstractly considered, language refers to an open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested" (GT 198).

nification. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler is very clear about these connections:

> Political signifiers, especially those that designate subject positions, are not descriptive; that is, they do not represent pregiven constituencies, but are empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds. No signifier can be radically representative, for every signifier is the site of a perpetual *méconnaisance*; it produces the expectation of a unity, a full and final recognition that can never be achieved. Paradoxically, the failure of such signifiers – 'women' is the one that comes to mind – fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. It is what opens the signifier to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification (BM 191).

To summarize, Butler argues for a theory of language that can be called "anti-descriptivism" and she makes immediately clear that this position "provides a linguistic theory for an anti-essentialist identity politics" (BM 208). When adapting this view we can notice that the process of naming – for example naming somebody a 'woman' – "entails both the effectivity *and* the radical contingency of naming as an identity-constituting performance" (BM 208). Butler's aim is to think language as "freed from the fixity of the referent" (BM 211). Butler wants to rethink the referent as a signified in the way that the referent cannot be conceptualized as prior to the process of signification. That does not mean that we can get rid of referentiality in general. That is why I think that Chamber and Carver's description of Butler's view of language as "non-referential" (Chamber/Carver 2008, 48) is not completely adequate. Butler's aim is not to eliminate referentiality utterly, but to put into question the idea of a fixed and external referent and to rethink the referentiality of language as a permanent process of resignification. Referentiality has still its place within this conception of language, but that language can no longer be centered around the notion of a fixed referent. This is especially comprehensible in the case of identity categories. Above all, Butler wants to draw our attention to the political consequences and opportunities that follow from this view of language, when she repetitively points out that "to understand political signifiers on the model of a performative theory of names can provide for the kind of variation and rearticulation required for an anti-essentialist radical democratic project" (BM 211).

Questioning the Subject

After that excursus into the embedding of Butler in a complex theory of language, which binds linguistic and political representation in a model of permanent resignification, that can no longer be grounded in a preexisting referent outside of signification processes, I want to return to the question of the subject. Analogously to her theory of language, which does not entail that language has no referential function at all, but that it cannot be founded

on a preexisting referent, Butler's argument is not that there is no subject after all, but rather, that the subject cannot be taken as a pregiven.

> To refuse to assume, that is, to require a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction and the political meaning and consequentiality of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory (CF 36).

To refuse the notion of a preexisting subject requires to draw the attention to processes of subject formation. This shift of perspective is in Butler's view also always a shift towards the political, and she argues against the non-political status of traditional theories of the subject: "To claim that politics requires a stable subject is to claim that there can be no *political* opposition to that claim. Indeed, that claim implies that a critique of the subject cannot be a politically informed critique but, rather, an act which puts into jeopardy politics as such" (CF 36).

Butler's perspective allows for political inquiries into the formation of the subject – which, as we shall again see shortly, continues to function as a critical category that names a site within a structure – that requires and entails a variety of investigations into "subjectivating processes", "institutional histories of subjection and subjectivation", or "the grammar of the subject" (CF 41f.). Intriguingly, Butler continues to speak in the first person when asking how "a position becomes a position", implying that she does not exclude herself from the implications of her theory: "My position is mine to the extent that 'I' – and I do not shirk from the pronoun – replay and resignify the theoretical positions that have constituted me, working the possibilities of their convergence, and trying to take account of the possibilities that they systematically exclude" (CF 42). Butler then goes on to argue that "it is simply not a strong enough claim to say that the 'I' is situated" (CF 42)[52], because that would still sound as if the individuals relation to these constitutive subject position would be one of "shuffling through them instrumentally, casting some aside, incorporating others" (CF 42). Butler admits that we might sometimes act like that, choosing freely among positions, but she insists that that is definitely not always the case and that it is not the main relation that an individual has towards those positions: "The 'I' this 'I', is *constituted* by these positions, and these 'positions' are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable subject" (CF 42). In this passage Butler is also very clear that what she is talking about is not a mere language

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52 That was Benhabib's formulation in her first contribution to *Feminist Contentions* (Benhabib 1995a, 26), which Butler replies to here.

game. What she is interested in are 'material practices and institutional arrangements', the 'institutional histories of subjection and subjectivation', as well as 'matrices of power and discourse'; it is really about concrete social and *material* dynamics. Given Butler's theory of language, however, these dynamics can never be separated from *linguistic* practices of identification and resignification. Thus, for Butler there is really nothing like a sharp distinction between "*structural processes* and *dynamics of socialization and individuation*" and "historical and hermeneutical processes of signification and meaning-constitution", as Benhabib suggests, arguing that Butler deals with the latter but ignores the former (Benhabib 1995b, 109f.).

So far in this chapter, I have referred to texts from the early 1990s. But interestingly enough, it seems as if Butler has not changed her opinion in this respect. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* she reiterates that "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (GA 7). A 'matrix of norms', as she now calls it, is "the condition for the emergence of the 'I', even though the 'I' is not causally induced by those norms" (GA 7). Butler goes on to refer to the many critics of her work and their worries of the implications this theory of the subject supposedly entails: "Although many contemporary critics worry that this means that there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability, that conclusion does not follow" (GA 8). This, again, clearly follows already from the scope of Butler's investigation, which she was very clear about from the outset: "The critique of the subject is not a negation or repudiation of the subject, but, rather, a way of interrogating its construction as a pregiven or foundationalist premise." (CF 42) That requires to ask once again the question about the scope of Butler's work, and what asking the kind of question she is raising implies .

Contingent Foundations

In her contribution to the debate in *Feminist Contentions*, Butler repeatedly insists that she does not know what 'postmodernism' or 'poststructuralism' are, but at one point she says that if there was one insight that she would call 'poststructuralist', then it would be "that power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms, including the subject position of the critic" (CF 39). That insight implies the famous dictum that there could be no position outside of power and that therefore no resistance is possible that is not priorly based in the power it wanted to criticize and eventually overcome. But Butler's number one priority at this point is, in fact, not the question where resistance is located, but, reversely, what it implies to establish such a position outside of power, even if

it might be the position of the critic. She writes: "To establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises, and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality" (CF 39). We can see that what Butler criticizes are positions that base themselves on a foundation they presuppose as natural and pregiven, because Butler's suspicion is that these reportedly pregiven foundations disguise that they are themselves established through certain operations of power. Butler makes clear that

> the point is not to do away with foundations, or even to champion a position that goes under the name of antifoundationalism. Both of those positions belong together as different versions of foundationalism and the skeptical problematic it engenders. Rather, the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes of forecloses (CF 39).

So Butler's point of view is not the nihilistic or relativistic one that there are no foundations whatsoever, but rather that the notion of a *foundation* must not be taken as pregiven and natural in a sense that allows for no further interrogations. Butler's strategy is to open up so-called foundations for further investigations, what in her point of view is "the very precondition of a politically engaged critique" (CF 39).

Already in the 1990 preface of *Gender Trouble* Butler – in very strong and controversial language – declares as her goal to "expose the foundational categories […] as effects of a specific formation of power", which "requires a form of critical inquiry" that Butler – following Foucault – calls "genealogy" (GT xxxi). It is important to highlight that the scope of *Gender Trouble* is to argue against "foundationalist reasoning" (GT 194) that "falsely presumes" that "agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive 'I' " (GT 195). Butler's point of departure is this critique of foundationalism and she therefore starts with a shift toward an interrogation of processes of subject and identity formation. For Butler it is no longer possible to take identities or subject positions as pregiven facts that only need to be described within politics or theory, instead, we need to take a close look on how they are constituted within a discursive field of power. "The shift from an *epistemological* account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification* permits an analysis that takes the epistemological mode itself as one possible and contingent signifying practice" (GT 197). In *Gender Trouble,* Butler outlines the conclusions of those insights for a theory of gender:

> There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as inteligible [sic] sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility (GT 203).

The reference to an ontological foundation is an act that always already operates within a political context and establishes the very notion of foundation it supposes to represent. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler describes this act with a paradoxical formulation: "The pointing to a ground which is never recovered becomes authority's groundless ground" (BM 108). Hence, the reference to a ground has to be rethought as an act of signification that in and through the signification signifies a specific configuration as the ground. "Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground" (GT 203).

As Chambers and Carver point out about Butler's account, "the form and content of her discussion – while polemically cast as trouble for feminism – have an impeccable origin in political theory and have broad implications in philosophy" (Chamber/Carver 2008, 21). This is already the case in *Gender Trouble* and is implied in the way she "casts her argument in very general terms about 'the subject' as such" (Chamber/Carver 2008, 20f.). So, how can we formulate Butler's argument in terms that allow for connections with general questions of political theory?

Genealogy of Naturalization Processes

The main focus of Butler's account can be characterized as questioning "naturalization processes" (Chamber/Carver 2008, 39). It is to contest those "foundationalist fictions" (Chamber/Carver 2008, 20) that serve to secure certain formations of politics by casting their origins as something natural and pregiven. Her insight is that "what is said to have been 'already' in existence in this state of nature (namely the human subject) is thus *naturalised* through the activity of making this claims convincingly. That is, the subject is ontologically secured in a supposedly pre-political and even pre-social realm" (Chamber/Carver. 2008, 21). As already mentioned, this project goes back to the preface of *Gender Trouble*, where Butler when outlining the scope of this project makes it very clear that her aim is the genealogy of such naturalization processes.

> A genealogical critique refuses to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather, genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* or *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. The task of this inquiry is to center on – and decenter – such defining institutions. (GT xxxi)

In other words, genealogy, for Butler, means the deconstruction and reconstruction of naturalization processes. In this sense genealogy implies two movements. First, genealogy

implies to deconstruct notions of naturalness, that means to show that what is thought to be natural and pregiven does, in fact, not justify this status after all. Second, the genealogy needs to reconstruct the processes that have established something as natural and pregiven, that is, the operation that constituted the naturalness of the natural in first place. In this sense, Butler speaks of "a political genealogy of gender ontologies (GT 45), which is meant to show that categories of gender are in fact not natural, but result from permanent processes of naturalization.

However, Butler is keen to point out that to "deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or reemployment that previously has not been authorized" (CF 49). Or, in other words: "To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it from its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by that metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims" (BM 30). We can see here that the deconstruction of naturalness and the genealogy of naturalization processes are not merely epistemological projects, but in first place political actions. They serve the purposes of challenging existing power relations and opening up new political opportunities. Whereas the traditional reference to natural foundations which do not allow for critical interrogation leads to a significant depoliticization, Butler seeks a radical repoliticization of all foundations. There are no foundations that are independent of certain formations of power, and whenever something is stated as prior to power, one needs to wonder which power relations where at work in this statement. To declare something as prior to power means to immunize it against political contestation and to limit political possibilities. Conversely, calling presuppositions into question means reintroducing them into the realm of the political to open up political opportunities.

That certainly allows for an application of Butler's theory within the realm of a critical political theory. Butler's project of a genealogy of naturalization processes has to be considered as a radically political project in the sense that it entails a radical politicization that puts into question any foundation of politics that is not open for further political investigation and critique. It is radical in the original sense of the word, as it goes all the way to the grounds of politics and opens up those grounds to be immanently political. Hence, it will not be without consequences for the status of politics either.

But before we can return to these matters, we have to take a closer look at Butler's account of the political subject and particularly her investigation into the process of subject forma-

tion, which will be the topic of the following chapter. In the course of this discussion, the link between subject formation and power will also become more pronounced.

6. Theories in Subjection

"As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical." (PLP 1) Butler starts her book *The Psychic Life of Power* with this statement. Correspondingly, the aim of this book is to investigate into this paradoxical structure of subjection. In the course of her inquiry, Butler points out that not only the process of subjection has a paradoxical form, but also the power involved in the process as well as the subject formed by the process turn out to have such a form.

Butler shows that "subjection" is the name of two distinct processes, first, "the process of becoming subordinated by power", and, second, "the process of becoming a subject" (PLP 2). However, as it will turn out, these two processes are in fact not two separate processes, but rather two different ways of looking at the one process of subjection. Precisely because of this double form, the process of subjection is paradoxical. In her inquiry, Butler first of all draws from Foucault and Althusser's notion of "*assujetissement*", a French term that signifies this double process of becoming a subject and of becoming subordinated. It is meant to denote that becoming a subject and becoming subordinated are inseparable, that becoming a subject always implies a certain subordination. "No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing 'subjectivation'[53] (a translation of the French *assujetissement*)" (PLP 11).

In order to investigate into the paradoxical process of subjection, Butler wants to think together two theories that usually have quite a lot of reservations towards each other, Foucault's theory of power on the one hand, and a theory of the psyche as developed in psychoanalysis on the other hand. (PLP 2f.) The issue of subjection dealt with in *The Psychic Life of Power* was already one of Butler's major concern in previous works. Accordingly, she asks in *Contingent Foundations* : "Is it not always the case that power operates in advance, in the very procedures that establish who will be the subject who speaks in the name of feminism, and to whom? […] What are the institutional histories of subjection and subjectivation that 'position' me here now" (CF 41)? This chapter will investigate Butler's notion of the process of subjection and the concepts of power and the subject implied by it.

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53 Butler usually uses the term 'subjection' to refer to this double process of subordination and subject formation in its whole complexity. The term 'subjectivation' is hardly used.

The Many Faces of Power

Power is a certainly a crucial concept for political science. Among political scientists it is generally considered one of the main categories of politics which political science has to investigate (Shively 2007 and Patzelt 2003, 39ff.). However, what the term 'power' precisely means is not as clear among political scientist as the agreement on the crucial status of this category. Indeed, there have also been long lasting discussions about the conceptualization of power, about the questions: What is power? How can it be conceptualized? By which means can it be investigated?

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a dispute about the notion of 'power' and specifically its distribution across disciplines and research designs. Based on a case study on power in American communities Robert Dahl[54] defined power the following way: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957, 202f.) In their article "Two Faces of Power" Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz[55] argue that this concept of power is insufficient to cover all aspects of an investigation of power. They write:

> Of course, power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affects B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A (Bachrach/Baratz 1962, 948).

Power is not only exercised when A openly forces B to do what A want, but also through the "mobilization of bias" (Bachrach/Baratz 1962, 952), which is in place in every political process. Peter Digeser[56], however, suggests that "the second face did not alter our conceptual map of power", because both faces presuppose "agents coercively advancing well-understood, self-defined interests against the interests of other agents". Therefore, they together constitute the so called "liberal conception of power" (Digeser 1992, 979). Against this liberal conception, Digeser refers to Steven Lukes[57], who highlights a third face of power. "Lukes contented that power *could* be exerted even if B consciously wants to do what A desires. Lukes claimed that if B acts contrary to her objective, real interests then power is being exercised." (Digeser 1992, 979) This conception is clearly a develop-

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54 Robert Dahl is an American political scientist. He is a former president of the American Political Science Association and the Sterling Professor emeritus of Political Science at Yale University.
55 Peter Bachrach (1918-2007) was an American political scientist. He was a professor of Political Science at Temple University.
56 Peter Digeser is an American political scientist. He is currently a professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.
57 Steven Lukes is a British political scientist. He is currently a professor of Politics and Sociology at New York University.

ment beyond the liberal conception and Digeser therefore calls it – using Lukes's terminology – the "radical conception of power" (Digeser 1992, 979). Still, this conception of power shares the fact with the liberal conception that it presupposes a subject whose interest can be clearly determined without reference to power. This presumption, however, was radically disputed by Foucault's conception of power, and that is why Digeser calls Foucault's conception the "fourth face of power". Digeser also highlights the different questions that are central to the respective faces of power:

> Under the first face of power the central question is, 'Who, if anyone, is exercising power?' Under the second face, 'What issues have been mobilized off the agenda and by whom?' Under the radical conception, 'Whose objective interests are being harmed?' Under the fourth face of power the critical issue is, 'What kind of subject is being produced?' (Digeser 1992, 980).

In Foucault's radically shifted perspective on power, power is not conceptualized as something external to the subject, something that effects a subject that is already preestablished. On the contrary, power is at work in subject formation. Therefore, power is not something we can simply resist, we cannot escape power, because our existence is dependent on it. Butler writes about Foucault's conception of power:

> But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are (PLP 2).

Following Foucault, Butler wants to investigate into the productive dimension of power, the way power is producing what it supposedly oppresses. If we consider this productive dimension, power is not simply something that oppresses a subject that is priorly established. Instead, power has to be reconsidered as constitutive for the subject. Accordingly, the subject has no existence prior to its subjection under power, but is formed by its very subordination.

Even though Butler owes a lot to Foucault, she also points out certain shortcomings of Foucault's focus on the productive dimension of power. In her eyes, Foucault most notably lacks an elaboration on the "specific mechanism of subject formation", in particular, she points out that "the entire domain of the psyche [...] remains unexplored" (PLP 2). Hence, Butler's question is: "What is the psychic form that power takes?" (PLP 2) This is precisely where psychoanalysis comes into play. Butler wants to develop a certain "psychoanalytic criticism of Foucault", because she believes that one cannot investigate the process of subjectivation "without recourse to a psychoanalytic account of the formative or generative effects of restriction or prohibition" (PLP 87). But, on the other hand, Butler is also very clear that she does not want to fall back on any simple notion of the unconscious as a

source of a necessary resistance. Therefore, her inquiry also implies a Foucaultian critique of psychoanalysis, a "reemergence of a Foucaultian perspective *within* psychoanalysis" (PLP 87). Accordingly, Butler's aim is not to use those theories to refute each other, on the contrary, she is clear that her inquiry "seeks to explore the provisional perspectives from which each theory illuminates the other" (PLP 3). That implies questioning certain aspects of Foucault's theory as well as certain facets of psychoanalysis.

The main questions are: Where can resistance be located? How does alteration take place? Which instances account for the ability of opposition? In this context, Butler asks Foucault how he seeks to theorize resistance: "How might he account for psychic resistance to normalization" (PLP 87)? The question asked of psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is if a notion of resistance can simply be presupposed as a necessary function of the unconscious. Is it a capacity that is always in place? Or could it be that the resistance is also something socially and discursively constructed (PLP 88)? This complex question of resistance – located in the tension of Foucault and psychoanalysis – is the issue Butler wants to face in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

Paradoxical Subjection

In order to deal with the question of resistance, the task is to investigate the "tropological inauguration of the subject", as Butler calls it.[58] The problem one is confronted with when trying to give an account of the subjection of the subject is that one already needs to presuppose a subject that receives the power by which it is inaugurated in first place. Thus, there seems to be a fundamental problem with the project of giving an account of the inaugurating subjection of the subject. Butler concludes that it might be that "we are no longer in the business of 'giving an account of the formation of the subject'. We are, rather, confronted with the tropological presumption made by any such explanation" (PLP 4). We cannot speak about subjection without referring to a subject that undergoes the process of subjection. At the same time, the process of subjection implies that there is no subject prior to subjection, but that the subject comes into existence only through and after undergoing its subordination. Thus, there is something wrong with our reference, a remarkable oddity:

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58 A "trope" is a rhetorical figure of speech. The word derives from the Ancient Greek *tropos*, which means 'turn'. We speak of a trope when using a word or sentence in a way other than what is considered its literal or normal meaning. For the purpose of her book Butler uses the definition that "a trope operates in a way that is not restricted to accepted versions of reality" (PLP 201 (1)). Instances of a trope are for example metaphor, metonymy or allegory. In the case in question it may be most adequate to speak of an allegory, which means a sustained metaphor that is continued over longer passages, maybe even whole paragraphs or texts.

"The figure which we refer has not yet acquired existence and is not part of a verifiable explanation, yet our reference continues to make a certain kind of sense" (PLP 4). We can see that the "paradox of subjection" Butler tries to outline in *The Psychic Life of Power* also implies a "paradox of referentiality: namely, that we must refer to what does not yet exist" (PLP 4). On the one hand, our reference does not work, there is something constitutively wrong with our reference. On the other hand, we cannot omit referring to the subject and its formation. This paradoxical situation has important consequences for any account about the subject:

> On the one hand, the subject can refer to its own genesis only by taking a third-person perspective on itself, that is, by dispossessing its own perspective in the act of narrating its genesis. On the other hand, the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that the constitution has already taken place, and thus arrives after the fact (PLP 11).

There is a certain limit to the ability to narrate the genesis of the subject, a limit that cannot be exceeded, but forms the limit of narration itself.[59] The consequences of this insight become most apparent if we consider the question of agency.

If we take into account the paradoxical structure of subjection, "the agency of the subject appears to be an effect of its subordination" (PLP 12). But does that mean that the agency of the subject is determined by its subordination? Do we have to conclude that there is no space for variation of power? If the answer is yes, then it is seriously doubtful if it is still warrantable to speak of an agency of the subject. But is the answer necessarily yes? This is a very important question, since it was the most urgent concern of many of Butler's critics. So far, it seems to be the case that any form of resistance necessarily needs to reinvoke the very same power that inaugurates the subject, effectively stabilizing the power in place. The determination of the agency of the subject by the power that inaugurates the subject seems to be the only possible conclusion. However, it is very clear that Butler does not agree with this reasoning. She does not think that all alternatives have been sufficiently investigated and forces us to take a closer look at the complex relationship of power and the subject.

What can be said about the relation of subject and power? On the one hand, it is certainly the case that the subject, through its inaugurating subordination under power, is confronted with power that precedes its own existence. The temporality of the power responsible for the formation of the subject is not the same as the subjects own temporality. On the other hand, however, there is a break between the power that is constitutive for the formation of

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59 This is one of the main issues discussed in *Giving an account of oneself*. We can see that certain themes of this later text, which is sometimes considered as a significant shift in the development of Butler's theory, are not that new after all, but already played an important role in Butler's works of the 1990s.

the subject and the power exerted when the subject acts. "The power that initiates the subject fails to remain continuous with the power that is the subject's agency. A significant and potentially enabling reverse occurs when power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's 'own' agency" (PLP 12). Butler's conclusion is that "agency cannot logically be derived from its conditions" (PLP 12) – as the concern of her critics was – precisely because no continuity can be presupposed between the power that is constitutive for the subject and the power enacted be the subject's agency. The break that opens up between the enabling power and the enacted power is exactly the site of agency. Thus, the notion of an agency that is conditioned by power does not necessarily imply the stabilization of the power that enables it. On the contrary, "the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible" (PLP 13). Whereas the power enacted by the subject remains bound to the power enabling its agency, this link is intrinsically ambivalent. "This conclusion is not to be thought as (a) a resistance that is *really* a recuperation of power or (b) a recuperation that is *really* a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency" (PLP 13).

Butler forces us to take a still closer look at the paradoxical structure of power. On the one hand, we have seen that power – signifying the conditions that enable and inaugurate the subject – has to be thought as preceding the subject. On the other hand, we also have to consider the reverse perspective that power is enacted by the agency of the subject. In one point of view, the subject is an effect of power, in the other, power is an effect of the subject. Butler, however, goes on to point out that there is no power prior to the subject, similarly as there is no subject prior to its subjection. Whereas power is the condition of the subject's emergence, we also have to consider that "a condition does not enable or enact without becoming present" (PLP 13). For Butler – as well as for Foucault – power is certainly not a substance, it cannot be thought as something locatable somewhere external to the subject, it is not some kind of entity we can point at. Power is nothing but the condition of the subject's emergence and, hence, cannot be considered independently of the inauguration of the subject. "Because power is not intact prior to the subject, the appearance of its priority disappears as power acts on the subject, and the subject is inaugurated (and derived) through this temporal reversal in the horizon of power" (PLP 13f.). Power has a remarkable double status: First, it acts on the subject as the condition of its possibility, second, it is reiterated by the subject's own agency. We are confronted with "two incommensurable temporal modalities": on the one hand, power is something prior to the

subject, always preceding its emergence as the condition of its possibility. On the other hand, power is something that follows from the subject, it is the effect of the subjects agency (PLP 14). Butler highlights that this second modality again carries two sets of meanings. First, we can consider it in the way that "subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself". Second, the reiteration of power by the agency of the subject also implies that the subjection is at the same time the condition of possibility for resistance and opposition (PLP 14).

We are able to comprehend now, why Butler considers "the subject as an inevitable stumbling block of social theory" (PLP 14). Traditionally, the question of the subject was conceptualized only in the two modalities described, seen as contradicting alternatives: "Many conversations on the topic have become mired in whether the subject is the condition or the impasse of agency" (PLP 14). Butler suggests that those conversations have their justification in the topic, but that we should reverse our perspective and consider that "the subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency" (PLP 14f.). So, it is not about choosing between those supposedly contradicting alternatives, on the contrary: "A theory of the subject should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation" (PLP 15). The problem with the traditional accounts is that "an irresolvable ambiguity arises when one attempts to distinguish between the power that (transitively) enacts the subject, and the power enacted by the subject, that is, between the power that forms the subject and the subject's 'own' power" (PLP 15). Therefore, Butler insists on this "ambivalent scene of agency" (PLP 15) that has to be taken into account in all its ambiguity. "Power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject" (PLP 15). We cannot abstract from this "metaleptic reversal in which the subject produced by power becomes heralded as the subject who *founds* power" (PLP16). Neither can power be explained by reference to the subject, nor can the subject be determined by reference to power. Power and the subject are not reducible to each other. Therefore, an account of the paradoxical process of subjection has to take into account the whole ambivalence of power and agency (PLP 16).

Reiteration as Alteration

One of the aims of *The Psychic Life of Power* is to give an account of "political agency in postliberatory times" (PLP 18). If we no longer can – leaving aside the question if we ever could – ground agency in the simple notion of a subject that intrinsically possesses the

capacity to act, then we have to take into consideration the whole ambivalence of a radic-ally conditioned agency. As we have seen, the agency of the subject cannot be considered independently of its subordination under power. That agency implies subordination, however, "is not the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject (PLP 17), making the agency of the subject implausible, as some critics have argued (Hauskeller 2000, 141). "But neither does it restore a pristine notion of the subject, derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always and only opposed to power" (PLP 17). For Butler, the liberal view characterizes "naive forms of political optimism", while the other view characterizes "politically sanctimonious forms of fatalism"; Butler's aim is "to steer clear of both these alternatives" (PLP 17).

In its agency, the subject is always reiterating its subjection. But that does not mean that the subject's agency can be reduced to the conditions of its subjection. The power enacted by the subject is not the same as the power that enacts the subject. There is a break between the power prior to the subject and the power invoked by the subject. The question, then, is how subjection can "become a site of alteration" (PLP 11)? We have to consider that the break is not a bad break, but an enabling break, a break that allows for the subject's agency, and that opens up space for alteration. Butler asks: "How is it that the power upon which the subject depends for existence and which the subject is compelled to reiterate turns against itself in the course of that reiteration? How might we think resistance within the terms of reiteration" (PLP 12)? These are clearly main issues one has to face when dealing with Butler's theory of the subject. The question of resistance was also one of the main concerns of most of Butler's critics. We have to ask ourselves: What is meant by this very term "reiteration"? What distinguishes the notion of reiteration from a normal repetition?

Before we can return to these questions in chapter eight, the notion of power at work here needs to be discussed in more detail. We have to remember that the main objection by Lorey and Hauskeller was that Butler has a monolithic conception of power that is, moreover, limited to discursive practices. In contrast to this objection, Butler states that "the subject is not 'spoken' into existence and that the matrices of power and discourse that constitute the subject are neither singular nor sovereign in their productive action" (PLP 5). Power and discourse cannot be thought as static, monolithic blocks, they are no static entities – in fact, they are no entities at all – they do not remain constant over time, even though they implicate a certain degree of stability. But in addition to that, we always have to remember that "if conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated", and this is where the subject comes into play, because "the subject is precisely the site of such reitera-

tion, a repetition that is never merely mechanical" (PLP 16). Hence, we have to take a closer look at the interplay of power and its reiteration by the subject, to adequately comprehend the status of power at stake here. Butler discusses this interplay also in slightly altered contexts. What does it mean for the status of power, if power is not only seen as the condition of possibility for subject formation, but if power is also considered as reiterated by the agency of a radically conditioned subject?

In *Bodies that Matter*, for instance, Butler writes – when discussing the status of gender norms – that "the force and necessity of these norms […] is thus functionally *dependent on* the approximation and citation of the law" (BM 14).[60] The law "is repeatedly fortified and idealized as the law only to the extent that it is reiterated as the law, produced as the law, the anterior and inapproximable ideal, by the very citations it is said to command" (BM 14). Certainly, the law is not the same as its instantiations, it cannot be reduced to certain instances of its enforcement. On the other hand, however, the law cannot persist without those instances, it is only established and preserved as the law via those iterations that idealize it as the law.

> In fact, the norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life. The norm has no independent ontological status, yet it cannot be easily reduced to its instantiations; it is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts (UG 48).

In this quote, which is taken from *Undoing Gender*, Butler repeats the main point that the norm does not exist independently of its instantiations, but cannot be reduced to them either.[61] She makes explicit that the "norm has no independent ontological status", that means, the norm is certainly not an entity, we cannot see the norm as a norm; all we can see are instantiations of the norm, reiterations that repeatedly idealize the norm as the norm. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler states that it is a common misreading of Foucault "if power is misconstrued as a grammatical and metaphysical subject" (BM 9). Power is certainly not a subject, not a substance, not an entity, and Butler concludes: "There is no

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60 In this quote Butler does not write about "power", but about "law" and "norms". I do not think, however, that we should put to much emphasis on the specifics of Butler's terminology here, because Butler really is not clear about her terminology. I do not intend to discuss Butler's lack of a clarification of these important concepts and their distinction here. For the purpose of the present inquiry, 'law' can be read as almost analogical with 'power'. Maybe we can state a difference so far that power is easier to change, while the law is of longer duration and more persistent. Regarding the notion of 'norm', I want to show in the following chapter that Butler uses this term more often in her more recent writings, where her understanding of 'norm' and 'normativity' becomes more pronounced (Distelhorst 2007, 217).

61 I am trying to highlight the continuity in Butler's account here and am therefore forced to downplay differences and discontinuities. One shift that we can clearly notice between Butler's earlier texts and *Undoing Gender* is her stronger emphasis on bodily and every day practices in the later text. But, to me, that seems to be more of a change of emphasis than a shift in the content. However, the emphasis on those practices is clearly an improvement of her account.

power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (BM 9). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler refers back to this sentence from her earlier text and warns her reader against a possible misreading. Butler's explanation, however, should not come as a surprise to us, as it is in line with the argument developed so far. She writes: "This statement was not meant to suggest that power acts without the subject. On the contrary, for power to act, there *must* be a subject, but that necessity does not make the subject into the origin of power" (PLP 203 (5)).

Power and the subject are linked together in the process of subjection. Subjection, however, is not a singular process, but a permanent enforcement. The subject is not simply produced as a subject at one point and remains it down the road, rather, the subject is "repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced anew again and again)" (PLP 93). Subjection is a permanent process and in and through that process subject and power are linked together, not as stable unities, but in their alterability. "It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization" (PLP 93). Once again, Butler wants to focus on this moment of resistance and alteration in the repetitive reiteration of subjection: "The Foucaultian subject is never fully constituted in subjection, then; it is repeatedly constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of repetition that repeats against its origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power" (PLP 94).

Considering the consequences for our understanding of power, we can conclude with a radical historization of power: "The reiteration of power not only temporalizes the conditions of subordination but shows these conditions to be, not static structures, but temporalized – active and productive" (PLP 16). Not only does Butler emphasize the ontological status of power as radically non-substantial, she does not only show the consequent non-naturalness and alterability of power, she also accentuates the power's historicity, its historical discontinuity and the possibility and necessity of change that follows from that radical temporalization.

To sum up, the critical analysis of the paradoxical process of subjection lead to an investigation of the complex interrelation of power and subject. Whereas power is traditionally considered as something that is exercised by one subject over another – both thought as already established and clearly identifiable – Butler suggests that power is already at work in the constitution of those subjects that exercise power among each other. Indeed, she claims that he most important effects of power have to be found in this process of subjec-

tion. The focus on subject constitution as an already political process, thus, allows for a critical analysis of very subtle, but nevertheless very forceful – and, indeed, violent – forms of power, which traditionally have been overlooked. But a full appreciation of Butler's potential innovations for political theory requires certain reformulations of her theory, which will be the topic of the following chapter.

7. Subjection, Hegemony and Normativity

In this chapter, I want to offer an interpretation of the complex process of subjection investigated in the previous chapter in the light of a theory of hegemony as developed by Laclau and Mouffe. As already indicated in chapter one, an interpretation of Butler's work along the terms of a theory of hegemony might probably be a productive way of receiving Butler in the field of a critical political theory (Sauer 2009, 151). I also want to suggest that this perspective on Butler's work allows for a reevaluation of her notions of 'normativity' and 'normative violence' in the light of a critical political theory. Finally, it gives us an opportunity to comprehend and criticize the notion of the 'constitutive outside', a conception that again shows the similarities between the theory of Butler and the theory of Laclau and Mouffe.

Subjection as Hegemony

I want to begin with claiming that subjection – which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, denotes the inextricably nexus of the formation of the subject and its agency with its prior subordination under power – should be read in the light of a theory of hegemony. At several occasions, Butler herself points to the importance of a theory of hegemony, but, unfortunately, she never elaborates in any detail what such a notion of hegemony might look like. To fill this void I suggest drawing on the theory of hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe, especially in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

In the volume *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, which displays a dialog of Butler with Laclau and Slavoj Žižek[62], Butler refers explicitly to " 'hegemony' – as defined by Antonio Gramsci and elaborated by both Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*" (RU 29). A few pages earlier she also provides the only description of hegemony available in her work. She writes that

> hegemony emphasizes the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding
> of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those

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62 Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher. He is currently a senior researcher in the department of Sociology at the University of Ljubljana and a Professor at the European Graduate School.

tacit and covert relations of power. Power is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture. Moreover, social transformation occurs not merely by rallying mass numbers in favour of a cause, but precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated, and new conceptual horizons opened up by anomalous or subversive practices. (RU 14)

In Butler's understanding, 'hegemony' focuses on every day practices and the question what structures and relations of power dominate and prescribe these practices. Butler is particularly interested in the potential for alteration that lies within this domain of every day life, how a variation of the hegemonic structures of every day practices can provide for social change. Bringing together these two emphasizes, she can conclude: "The theory of performativity is not far from the theory of hegemony in this respect: both emphasize the way in which the social world is made – and new social possibilities emerge – at various levels of social action through a collaborative relation with power." (RU 14)

In his very insightful book *Umkämpfte Differenz*, Lars Distelhorst[63] explores the opportunities that lie in a conflation of Butler's political theory of performativity and Laclau's[64] theory of hegemony. Distelhorst points out that it is a hopeful project to bring together the theories of these two thinkers, because, first, there has been an ongoing exchange between them – as for instance in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* –, second, they have a common theoretical background – for example they are in a basic agreement on a set of postliberatory and poststructural insights – and, finally, their respective theories are shaped in a way that makes it relatively easy to conflate them, because they seem to be a complement to each other in certain instances, providing opportunities to fill voids and weaknesses in each other's conceptions (Distelhorst 2007, 68). In short, Distelhorst claims that Butler's theory can win from a conflation with Laclau's theory and vice versa. Since the present inquiry is foremost interested in Butler's thought, it will only focus on the way Laclau can help to advance Butler's theory, leaving the other direction of this relation aside.

What can be gained for Butler's theory from a reading that connects it with a theory of hegemony as developed by Laclau? Distelhorst suggests that the utilization of Laclau's conceptions might allow us to reformulate and systematize Butler's theory along the line of

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63 Lars Distelhorst studied political science in Bremen and Berlin. He wrote his dissertation about Butler and Laclau (Distelhorst 2007) and was the author of an introduction to Butler's work (Distelhorst 2009).

64 Distelhorst focuses primarily on the work of Laclau, even though he admits that it is hard to separate the individual contributions of Laclau and Mouffe to their joined work. In the context of the discussion of Distelhorst's interpretation, I will follow Distelhorst and only refer to the name Laclau, but I invite the reader to add the name Mouffe while reading if he or she thinks – as I do – that one should not disregard her contribution.

a more political terminology (Distelhorst 2007, 17). Whereas the concept of hegemony in an implicit way pervades Butler's whole theory, this driving force is never made explicit, and, more urgent, a definition of this central concept is obtrusively missing. In other words, the importance of the concept of hegemony in Butler's work stands in sharp contrast to the difficulty to find any elaboration on this concept in her work, and precisely at this point Laclau can help to fill the void (Distelhorst 2007, 64f.).

One specific suggestion, which Distelhorst makes in this context, is to utilize Laclau's concept of discourse to broaden and enrich Butler's notion of the term (Distelhorst 2007, 64). As we have seen in chapter three, one of the main points of criticism against Butler's theory is that it is focussing on linguistic categories only, while ignoring other important (social or bodily) practices. This criticism has its justification when we consider the specifics of Butler's notion of discourse, which seems to be rather narrow and primarily, if not only, focussing on the linguistic level. However, this narrow notion of discourse in Butler's work can – without taking away anything from her theory, as I want to suggest in line with Distelhorst – easily be broadened in a way that allows it to include non-linguist practices as well, and thus avoiding the criticism. The concept of discourse developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* can provide this required broadening. In their text, Laclau and Mouffe give the following definition of discourse:

> In the context of this discussion, we will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 105)

As Distelhorst accurately interprets, this notion of discourse is not limited to language and linguistic practices, but includes any system of differentiated moments, including for instance gender identities, political identities or the like (Distelhorst 2007, 93). As a consequence, Laclau and Mouffe can reject "the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices" and instead claim

> (a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence; and (b) that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behaviourial aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities. (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 107)

I want to suggest that Laclau and Mouffe's notion of discourse is very much in line with Butler's project to overcome a sharp distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic prac-tices. In this context, Laclau and Mouffe's notion of discourse offers a convincing example of a conception that can cover all kinds of articulations of identities within a system of

differences. In that way, their notion of discourse allows to transcend the distinction of linguistic and material practices in a comprehensible and convincing way. Their insistence on "the *material* character of every discursive structure" makes clear that the statement that "every object is constituted as an object of discourse" has nothing to do with the question, if all objects are reducible to language or not, if there is a world outside of language or not (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 108). Discourse cannot be reduced to language or linguistic practices, and, therefore, the impossible distinction between discursive and non-discursive levels is not parallel with the distinction of linguistic and non-linguistic practices.

This notion of discourse has two further consequences that are very much in line with Butler's thought and can help to elaborate on aspects of Butler's theory that might be hard to comprehend. First, if discourse means the structured totality of articulatory practices that are constantly ongoing and never concluded, then this implies "that a discursive totality never exists in the form of a simply *given and delimited* positivity, the relational logic will be incomplete and pierced by contingency" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 110). Thus, Laclau and Mouffe come to a similar conclusion about the fundamentally ungrounded and contingent nature of (political) categories and the permanent possibility for alteration and change. This is the simple consequence of the ongoing process of articulatory practices that constitute any discursive formation. Second, this notion of discourse leads to a denaturalization of the subject, which now ought to be thought "in the sense of 'subject positions' within a discursive structure" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 115), as already discussed in chapter four. This discursively constituted subject, like any differentiated moment in a discursive formation, cannot be once and for all fixed, and is therefore confronted with the permanent opportunity and risk of alteration.

The contingent character of any discursive formation is also the reason why Laclau and Mouffe move forward to speak of hegemony in this context. "In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. […] It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 134). This very openness of the discursive formation as the precondition for hegemonic practices marks an important difference that distinguishes Laclau and Mouffe's concept from traditional notion of hegemony, especially within the neo-marxist tradition. While classic notions of hegemony usually work along a singular and coherent axis of domination within society (classically in marxist theory this axis will be class), a consequence of Laclau and Mouffe's theory is that the "hegemonic

formation […] cannot be referred to the specific logic of a single social force" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 142). Thus, for Laclau and Mouffe hegemony cannot mean one specific axis of domination, it cannot refer to one single centre of domination in society, because such a monolithic logic of domination is impossible in a society structured by articulatory practices and discursive formations. Against this logic of the "singleness of the hegemonic centre", Laclau and Mouffe argue for a point of view that takes into account a "variety of hegemonic nodal points" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 139). Hegemonic practices take place in such a social field formated by an ongoing process of articulatory practices constituting a contingent, but nevertheless relatively stable discursive formation. The open plurality of hegemonic axes and centers implied in this theory seems to allow for a productive interaction with Butler's notion of multiple forms of processes of subject formation by a variety of contingent and variable but nevertheless societally dominant modes of subjection.

To sum up, Butler does not provide any elaborated account of hegemony, but the concept is implicitly present in her work. It seems therefore productive to read her theory of subjection in connection with a more elaborate theory of hegemony, which also allows for a reformulation of her ideas in the light of a more explicitly political terminology. However, we should realize that this is really only a reformulation, because Butler within her own terminology steadily tries to address concerns that are similar to the ones a theory of hegemony has. This is in particular the case when Butler expresses her worries about the violence caused by discursive formation and established norms.

Hegemony as Normativity

The notion of the 'violence of the norm' or 'normative violence' is probably most apparent in Butler's more recent writings, in which she speaks much more explicitly about norms and forms of normativity. But, as will be shown, the invoked issue has in fact been a major concern throughout Butler's whole oeuvre. Accordingly, as Distelhorst suggests, the turn to the norm should be seen as a modification of Butler's language, not as a radical shift in her theory. Whereas Butler in her early writings was more focussed on the investigation of discursive formations, she later turned towards a more detailed elaboration on the normative character of those formations, which requires some attention for the concept of the norm itself. While the explicit emphasis on the norm is a new development, the exploration of norms and especially the violence of norms has always been an important issue for Butler. Similarly, the focus on norms in Butler's more recent writings does not imply that

the question of discursive formations is irrelevant in this later text. Rather, the shift in language should be seen as an attempt to reformulate the same concern within a new terminology (Distelhorst 2007, 217).

In fact, the only text in which Butler explicitly refers to the conception of the norm is "Gender Regulations", which is published in *Undoing Gender*. Butler's turn to the norm in this text must be seen in context of the question of "how discourse might be said to produce a subject" (UG 50). Thus, the notion of the norm has to be read in the context of an investigation of discourse and hegemony and the question of the power involved in the process of subjection. Butler makes clear: "A norm is not the same as a rule, and it is not the same as a law" (UG 41). A law is always explicit and functions first and foremost as an instrument of restriction. A norm, in contrast, "may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit", hence, they often cannot be seen directly, at least not easily, but appear "most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce" (UG 41). What is the function of the norm then? Butler answers: "The norm governs the social intelligibility of action" only allowing "for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such" (UG 41f.). The norm is intrinsically productive, governing a process of normalization that establishes a field of the intelligible. As such a instance, the norm "is a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects" (UG 48), thus deciding who can count as an intelligible subject and where the limits of the realm of the intelligible are.

The question of an "intelligible field of subjects", while articulated in a new way in *Undoing Gender*, has been a major concern in all of Butler's writings. Already in *Gender Trouble*, Butler was concerned about the "matrix of intelligibility" (GT 24) that governs the field of possible (gender) identities. In this early text, she particularly wants to investigate into the function of the "heterosexual matrix" (GT 7) in producing stable categories such as 'women'. In order to question the stability of this category – 'women' – and to reveal the hidden work of the 'heterosexual matrix' that produces it, she asks for "a *feminist genea-logy* of the category of women" (GT 8). Similarly, Butler formulates this concern in the preface of *Bodies that Matter*, describing the book as "an effort to think further about the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political" (BM xii).

We can see that despite Butler's employment of different sets of terminology, her major concern remains the same. She wants to investigate the norm as a social form of power, or, alternatively, the discursive formations – both notions refer to a similar process from

different perspectives – that govern the field of socially possible and acceptable identities. And, additionally, she wants to reveal the violence that these norms exercise against those who are at the limits of the socially acceptable, or, indeed, fall outside the realm of the social. When doing so, Butler – especially in her writings of the 1990s – usually focusses primarily on gender norms. In this context, Chambers and Carver employed the term "heteronormativity" to signify the process in which binary conception of gender and compulsory heterosexuality function as the norms that establish the field of possible gender. The term "heteronormativity" is also meant to signify the violence that these norms exercise towards those that fall outside the field of possible gender (Chambers/Carver 2008, 76, 121 and 136ff.). In her more recent works, however, Butler develops the same concern about the violence of the norms in the context of a discussion of war (PL), and it becomes clear that it is applicable in all context where norms define the boarders between the realm of the acceptable and the domain of the outside.

The use of the term violence in connection with an elaboration on norms might seem odd or out of place. Usually, violence is seen to signify an expression of force that can be sharply distinguished from power or norms. Commonly, it is used to refer to physical kinds of force in particular. Butler's notion of normative violence contradicts this common use of the word. It has to be seen against the background of the idea that violence does not only appear in the form of (physical) force, but also in more hidden and subtle forms. These subtle forms of violence are much harder to detect, but, at the same moment they might hit just as hard as or even harder than physical violence. With clear, but unreported reference to Derrida, Butler calls this form of violence also "the violence of the letter, the violence of the mark which establishes what will and will not signify, what will and will not be included within the intelligible"[65] (CF 52). Butler wants to indicate that there is an exercise of power that is much more violent than physical force, namely the violence of norms, a violence that stems from the norms and discursive formations that establish the social categories of identity and govern any process of subject formation.

What is the specific form that normative violence takes? What can hit one even harder than physical force? Butler's answer is that normative violence has the power of banning somebody from the realm of the intelligible, thereby basically declaring one's life unintelligible. Normative violence confronts individuals with the fact that they are living a life that is virtually seen as unlivable. Not all lives are *per se* considered as livable. On the contrary,

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65 The notion of the "violence of the letter" or "the violence of the mark" stem from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1983) and is meant to designate the violence inscribed into linguistic categories.

the definition of a livable life is always a contested question. The norm produces and regulates the field of livable life. But as a downside, the norm necessarily also produces and regulates a sphere of those lives that cannot be considered livable. Those lives excluded from the sphere of the livable form its outside. Butler is particularly interested in investigating and revealing the limits of the field of permitted identities, the limits of the realm of lives that are considered liveable or worth living. She especially wants to point out the unbearable destiny of those that are rendered outside the field of permitted identities and whose lives are therefore considered not worth living or, indeed, impossible. Butler's concern at this point seems very plausible: If the norm sanctions the field of possible identities, then one has to consider the violent consequences the norm has on those that cannot fulfill the requirements to count as such an identity.

The reformulation of Butler's account in the light of a theory of hegemony should enable us to appreciate Butler's contribution to a critical analysis of relations of power and domination and how her contribution can lead to an important expansion of the scope of such an analysis. If we only consider the power enforced by one subject on another, we miss a very important form of power that has already been at work in the formation of the very subjects that form the basis of our analysis. But, more importantly, if we only notice the power which is enacted between already established subjects, we ignore the power that is enforced on those that are not granted with the status of being a subject. Because one is not automatically a subject, but the subject has to be seen as a site within a social structure that an individual can only inhabit if it complies with the norms that regulate the structure. If an individual cannot comply with the norms, it will not be granted the status of a subject, and this exclusion from the status of the subject is, in Butler's view, the most violent form of power, because it deprives the individual of the basics of its social existence. The power that declares one to be excluded from the realm of the possible subjects is the most violent form of power.

The Constitutive Outside

However, an important problem emerges at this point when considering the status of those that fall outside the realm of the norm. Several questions arise: What is actually meant by the outside of the sphere of livable lives here? How can the outside of the norm be conceptualized? Who are the ones that are rendered to be outside the norm? What status do they have? Which consequences does their status have for their options of emancipation? These question are especially important for a rereading of Butler in the context of a critical polit-

ical theory. Even if we are not concerned with an emancipatory political project, the question of the outside is all but subsidiary. Butler points out that this question is of crucial importance for any politics, because the question of the outside is constitutive for the very field of the socially permitted and acceptable. The main problem is that Butler has conceptualized the outside in several ways in her work, ways that cannot be unified and sometimes even contradict one another.

The problem gets an additional dimension if we consider that there are again important similarities of Butler's view with the achievements of Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and with further elaborations by Laclau in his subsequent works. Accordingly, in *Bodies that Matter* Butler refers to Laclau and Mouffe's notion of "constitutive antagonism" when explaining that the formation of an identity is accompanied by a processes of exclusion that inextricably bind the identity to an outside that has a constitutive function in this very formation of this identity.

> In other words, any attempt to circumscribe an identity in terms of relations of production, and solely within those terms, performs an exclusion and, hence, produces a constitutive outside, understood on the model of the Derridean 'supplément,' that denies the claim to positivity and comprehensiveness implied by that prior objectivation (BM 194).

In other words, the main idea is that any identity is constituted in relation to an exclusion that produces an outside. This outside resists any attempt to fully comprehend it, to fully integrate it within a discursive formation. Thus, we are confronted with the irreducible openness of any discursive formation where any attempt to close it finds its limit in this unconceptualizable outside. However, as Butler also points out, that does not mean that the outside is beyond the sphere of discourse, that it can be thought independently of discursive formations:

> For there is an 'outside' to what is constructed by discourse, but this is not an absolute 'outside,' an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse; as a constitutive 'outside,' it is that which can only be thought – when it can – in relation to that discourse, at and as its most tenuous borders (BM 8).

How can an outside, which is said to form the border of discourse itself, be thought? And, more importantly, the question still remains: Who does actually count as outside? And additionally: What status have those that are banned there?

In *Contingent Foundations* Butler refers to the role of the outside in the process of subject formation. This text has already been discussed extensively in chapter four and five of the present inquiry and we can therefore build on the previous discussion of subject formation now to investigate into the role of the outside in this process. In the spirit of the general aim of denaturalization prevalent in this text she writes:

> For the subject to be a pregiven point of departure for politics is to defer the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself; for it is important to remember that subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view (CF 47).

Already one page earlier Butler states: "The subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity" (CF 46). These passages reveal a significant uncertainty and vagueness in Butler's conception of the constitutive outside. Formally speaking, we can summarize Butler's idea in the following way: The formation of the subject works through an exclusion that produces an outside, which is required for any process of subject formation and forms its very limit. But already in the short passage from *Contingent Foundations* cited above we find an enormous variation of suggestions how to conceptualize this outside. Butler speaks of "deauthorized subjects", "presubjects", "populations erased from view", "figures of abjection" and the "domain of abjected alterity". There are two possible interpretations of this variety of designations: Either Butler thinks that there are several limits of the process of subject formation and therefore also several versions of the outside that need to be distinguished. In this case, Butler has to be blamed for not providing any clue on how to conceptualize these different forms of the outside. The alternative is that the multiplicity of notions of the outside is an expression of Butler's own uncertainty on how to think the outside. If this is the case, her theory is in even bigger need of further clarification. Anyway, the notion of the outside in this text does not seem very convincing.

This is especially the case when we look at the examples of the outside that Butler herself offers. First, she refers to instances "when certain qualifications must first be met in order to be, quite literally, a claimant in sex discrimination or rape cases." (CF 47). In this instance, Butler employs a very narrow notion of the subject as subject before the law. While her example might provide some insight into the specific case, such a notion of the subject falls clearly short of covering the whole field of possible subject positions. Second, Butler – in the context of the Gulf War at the beginning of the 1990s – names "the Arab" as an instance of an "abjected alterity" (CF 46). One could raise the question why "the Arab" – to quote this classification, which Butler herself quotes – should count as an outside at all. Would it not be more adequate to conceptualize "the Arab" as a subordinated identity within an discursive formation that might be specified as a certain hegemonic intercultural setting?[66] In general, it seems that all the examples Butler offers in this text can easily be

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66 In *Precarious Life*, Butler reinvokes this concern about "the Arab" as deprived from the stats of a subject. In this later work, she makes clear that to count as a subject implies to live a life that is considered worth living, and that the life of "the Arab" is not considered a livable life (PL 19ff.) In the light of this later

conceptualized as located within a discursive formation as a distinct – even though subor-dinated – subject position. Hence, it does not become clear why the notion of an outside should be of any need, or indeed be the most adequate way to conceptualize these iden-tities.

Already in *Gender Trouble*, but to a much greater extent in *Bodies that Matter* and espe-cially *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler tries to conceptualize the outside as the abject. A closer examination of the concept of abjection might help to clarify matters. In the intro-duction of *Bodies that Matter* Butler writes:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous produc-tion of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unliv-able' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded iden-tification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation (BM 3).

In a footnote to this passage Butler explains that the notion of abjection "resonates with the psychoanalytic notion of *Verwerfung*" (BM 243 (2)). Usually, *Verwerfung* is translated as 'foreclosure', and signifies the unconscious, as in the case of Freud, or the realm of the 'real', as in the theory of Lacan. Abjection, in contrast, "designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (BM 243 (2)). Thus, the abject denotes individuals that do not fulfill the requirements to count as subjects, but nevertheless remain within the domain of the social, precisely with the status of being individuals that are excluded from the status of being subjects. Drawing on the distinction of individual and subject – as discussed in chapter four – we can say that the process of subject formation requires a domain of individuals that do not count as subject. Abjection signifies the process that produces the zone of those individuals that are excluded from the status as subjects. It is a zone of an outside – outside of being a subject – that nevertheless remains inside – inside the realm of the social.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler revisits the paradoxical status of those individuals excluded from the status of being subjects and thus inhabiting the borders of sociality. In this text, Butler speaks in the language of the norm. She writes: "The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intel-

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text, it seem justified to speak of "the Arab" as an "outside", as this anonymous mass of humans that is covered by this term is considered as outside the realm of livable lives.

ligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it" (UG 42). Butler's suggestion here is that there are certain identities at the border of sociality, that fail to conform to the norms that govern sociality, but nevertheless are defined in relation to the norms, and are therefore excluded from the norm while still falling under the norm.

But in *Undoing Gender* Butler also describes another form of being excluded from the norm that goes even further than being abject. Butler calls it the 'unintelligible'. This is the most intriguing conceptualization of the outside, because it is the strongest case of being excluded. But, at the same time, it is also the most problematic conceptualization of exclusion. To have this unbearable status means to

> become the other against which the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality. To be called a copy, to be called unreal, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed. But consider that it is more fundamental than that. For to be oppressed mean that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject as a possible or potential subject. But to be unreal is something else again. For to be oppressed one must first become intelligible. To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human. It is to find oneself speaking only and always as if one were human, but with the sense that one is not (UG 218).

The most comprehensive interpretation of the notion of the unintelligible in Butler's work has been presented by Chambers and Carver and I want to draw from their reading of this passage here. They make clear that "the unintelligible is not the marginalised or the abjected […], the discourse of intelligibility is not the same as a discourse of oppression […]. The 'unintelligible' are those 'others' who are made invisible by the norm […], the unintelligible cannot exist as 'human' " (Chambers/Carver 2008, 126). As they point out "the concept of unintelligibility counters our intuitive notion that 'everyone' counts as a human and is recognisable as such" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 128). Instead, it "suggests that the category of the human is not a given, but rather an achievement or production" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 126). Thus, "the 'unintelligible' are those for whom the norm makes life unlivable" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 128). In this sense, the category of the unintelligible is very powerful because it presents the most extreme case of normative violence, a form of violence that renders outside the sphere of the human (Chambers/Carver 2008, 128).

But the notion of the unintelligible also causes severe problems for any emancipatory project, because "the unintelligible cannot be included given that *they do not even exist as human*" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 128). In other words, no emancipatory project can

campaign for the inclusion of those who are unintelligible, because they do not even fulfill the requirements to be subjects for such emancipatory desires. Strictly speaking, we cannot even speak of the unintelligible, because whenever we speak of them we use categorizations that give them a name, and, thus, provide them with some kind of intelligible status. But the unintelligible do not have a name, they fall under no categorizations whatsoever, they are unintelligible precisely because they are excluded form all categorizations.

One might raise the question: Who is the unintelligible? Are lesbians, gays, intersex or transgender for example instances of the unintelligible? The answer can only be that none of these groups of people can count as unintelligible, simply for the fact that we already have names for them. They are not unintelligible, because they fall under certain – subordinated – categories. They are not outside of language, they cannot be rendered unintelligible. If we generalize the case, we have to conclude that it is generally impossible to name any instance of the unintelligible, because it is impossible to speak of the unintelligible in any direct way. Instead, "the unintelligible can only be brought to light as a category of human subjects *after* they have been rendered intelligible" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 127). Maybe some of the categories mentioned above are, even though they are not instances of the unintelligible, nevertheless good example of an exemplification of the notion of the unintelligible. As we have seen, it is impossible to name an instance of an unintelligible identity, because to do so would be a performative contradiction. We can only speak of the unintelligible afterwards, once they are granted a certain identity and are, thereby, included in the realm of the intelligible. Intersex and transgender seem to be good examples here. Only a few years ago, when there was no word for intersex or transgender yet, those people literarily did not exist. Strictly speaking, there was no intersex or transgender person before the invention of those terms. We can only speak of those people now, afterwards, after they entered the sphere of the intelligible.

We can see that the notion of the unintelligible is a very sharp-minded, comprehensible and theoretically consequent concept. But the question remains: Is it a politically useful concept? As we have seen, it is not applicable to any emancipatory struggles, because these struggles already presuppose the field of the intelligible. We might say that the unintelligible is prior to the struggles of the excluded and oppressed. Nevertheless, we can say in favor of the notion of the unintelligible that it reveals a form of normative violence that has not been seen before and could not be seen otherwise, the violence that takes place at the borders of the domain of the human and at the limits of what counts as a livable life. Hence, the notion of the unintelligible is useful for political analysis to the extent that it

reveals forms of normative violence, even though it does not seem to be applicable to emancipatory projects.

We need to make explicit now that the question of the unintelligible and the entire project that forms the background for development of this conception is based on a certain concern that has been the driving force behind Butler's work at least since *Gender Trouble*. Butler's work over the last 20 years seems to be structured around the question of who can count as a human and who is denied this status (Distelhorst 2009, 90). The common theme that binds together all of Butler's work is to analyze the norms and power relations that cause people to be outside the realm of the livable. This is linked to the task of altering these norms in a way that enables the excluded ones to also live a livable life (Distelhorst 2009, 111). On the very last page of *Gender Trouble* Butler writes: "The task here is not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist, but which exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible" (GT 203). Maybe this is not only the task of the book, but the task of Butler's whole authorship. Maybe this is the central concern that provides the coherence of all of Butler's work, its hidden ethical task. "Life and the creation of better conditions for our survival, but also our recognition as intelligible subjects" (Loizidou 2007, 7), as Elena Loizidou[67] suggests. This very important matter, which has become more explicit in Butler's more recent work (UG 1ff., PL 19ff.), needs closer examination, which will be conducted in chapter nine. The status of this concern especially as an ethical task or commitment will cause a set of difficult questions.

Part 3: Performativity as Political Theory

This part will offer a reading of Butler's notion of performativity and iterability. The aim is to provide an interpretation of these terms that allows for an understanding of performativity as a political theory. The conclusions that follow from this understanding of performativity for the conception of politics, however, will not be drawn in this chapter, as this will be the topic of the final two chapters. In chapter eight, the discussions of performativity and iterability will lead to the question of subversiveness. In this context, we will be confronted again with the problem of the questionable status of Butler's ethical commitments. This problem is especially prevalent in Butler's more recent work. These books will be discussed in chapter nine, where the continuity and shifts in Butler's development will

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be investigated. In the final subsection of chapter nine, the focus will be on Butler's ethical commitment and the question about the ethical dimension in Butler's work will be raised. The result of this discussion will be a confirmation of the claim that Butler should be read as a political theorist.

8. Performativity, Iterability and Subversiveness

The discussion in this chapter will resume a question raised in chapter six in the context of the interpretation of *The Psychic Life of Power*. The question is: "How might we think resistance within the terms of reiteration" (PLP 12)? Or, in a formulation that can already be found in *Gender* Trouble: How is "agency, then, […] to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (GT 198)? First, I will introduce Butler's notions of performativity and iterability. Second, I will investigate into how Butler conceptualizes subversiveness. In this context, then, I will take a closer look at drag and parody as potential subversive performances. Finally, I will raise the question about the status of ethics in Butler's work.

Performativity and Iterability

In this subsection, I will consider the notion of performativity with reference to "For a Careful Reading" (Butlers second contribution to *Feminist Contentions*) and *Bodies that Matter*. In the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes about the complexity of the task of describing the notion of performativity:

> Much of my work in recent years has been devoted to clarify and revising the theory of performativity that is outlined in *Gender Trouble*. It is difficult to say precisely what performativity is not only because my own views on what 'performativity' might mean have changed over time, most often in response to excellent criticism, but because so many others have taken it up and given it their own formulations (GT xv).

In "For a Careful Reading", Butler states that her use of the term performativity is taken from J.L. Austin's[68] *How to Do Things with Words,* from Derrida's reading of Austin in his famous article "Signature, Event, Context", and Paul de Man's[69] notion of 'metalepsis' in his text *Allegories of Reading* (CR 134). Drawing from Austin, Butler clarifies that "a performative act is one which brings into being or enacts that which it names" (CR 134), as

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68 J.L. Austin (1911-1960) was a British philosopher of language. He is widely associated with his concept of the speech act and the idea of performative speech.

69 Paul de Man (1919-1983) was born in Belgium, but made his Ph.D. at Harvard University. He taught at several universities before becoming a professor at the department of French and Comparative Literature at Yale University. He was a close friend of Jacques Derrida and a major figure in the distribution of deconstruction in America.

distinct from a constative act which only describes or states what is the case. In this way, the performative act "marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse" (CR 134). In contrast to a single performative act, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (BM 2). Thus, there is an important distinction between performance as an individual act and performativity as on ongoing practice.

Again drawing from Austin, Butler explains that for a performative utterance to be successful it must follow an established convention, for example, certain words have to be spoken and certain social requirements have to be met. It was Derrida's main innovation to point out that this can be read in the way that we can say that the performative force is linked to citation and iteration. Because, for an utterance to be performative, it must cite or, in other words, iterate an established convention. In Butler's words:

> For a performative to work, it must draw upon and recite a set of linguistic conventions which have traditionally worked to bind or engage certain kinds of effects. The force or effectivity of a performative will be derived from its capacity to draw on and reencode the historicity of those conventions in a present act. This power of recitation is not a function of an individual's *intention*, but is an effect of historically sedimented linguistic conventions (CR 134).

Following Derrida, Butler tries to think the required conventions for an effective performative act not as static and for ever fixed ones, but as the result of the iterability of the act itself. Accordingly, Butler calls the convention "*a sedimented iterability*" (CR 134). Of course, that does not mean that the sedimentation can ever be concluded, on the contrary, also the reformulation of the convention is itself a permanent process driven by the permanent reiteration of these conventions in unlimited performative acts. The conventions can always be reiterated and need to be iterated in order to sustain, a situation that Butler signifies – following Derrida – with the term *iterability*.

Since the effectiveness of a performative act is in this view no longer dependable on the subject's intention – at least not only – this leads to a decentralization of the subject. "The category of 'intention,' indeed, the notion of 'the doer' will have its place, but this place is no longer 'behind' the deed as its enabling source" (CR 134). Lloyd interprets that "it is Butler's contention that agency is an effect of action and not a cause. That is, while an utterance may appear to declare a prior intention, the prior intention is actually the effect of the utterance" (Lloyd 2005, 98). The possibilities of agency have to be found in connection with the iterability of the norms, as possibilities of change that are inscribed in the reiteration of the norms. These possibilities of alteration are not formed in the will of the doer, rather "there are possibilities in the resignifying process that produces doers that create

scope for resistance and change" (Lloyd 2005, 98). Additionally, the doer cannot completely control the effects of the reiteration, rather these effects are unforeseeable and erratic. In this discussion of performativity we are confronted with a conception of the subject as constituted in and through discourse, and a conception of agency that has to account for these processes of the subject formation as well as the iterability of the norms. Nevertheless, agency keeps a crucial place as the site of the reiteration of the norms and thereby also the site of possible alteration.

Already in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler develops the notion of performativity in connection with an investigation into the function of the norm – and this is where Butler exceeds both Austin and Derrida and finds her own, inventive and intriguing notion of performativity. In the context of a discussion of the conditions of sexuality, she writes that the oppositions between construction and determination are insufficient to account for the involved complexity. It is neither a voluntary construction, nor a fixed determination, instead the complex relation of performativity and norm requires close attention. "The 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of the norms" (BM 94). Performativity is not a voluntary act, it is not a free or theatrical self-presentation, rather, it has to be thought together with the function of the hegemonic norms. These norms are not only limiting performativity, but also enabling it. The norms form the condition of possibility of performativity, performativity is always in relation to the norms, only in their permanent reiteration:

> Here, at the risk of repeating myself, I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal conditions for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (BM 95).

Butler's notion of performativity is sometimes seen as a version of voluntarism in the way that it seems to evoke a subject that has the ability to craft or at least present itself in a kind of theatrical act. Against this interpretation, it must become clear that the notion of performativity only makes sense when considered in connection with an investigation into the function of the norm. In that light, performativity offers a way to understand the agency of the subject under hegemonic condition. On the other hand, some have argued that the notion of performativity leads to the end of the agency of the subject, because it makes any voluntary action of the subject impossible. This is also a very one-sided view of performativity that misunderstands the major innovation of this concept. It does not respect that

performativity is meant precisely as an attempt to explain how – under hegemonic conditions – the agency of the subject is nevertheless possible. To be more accurate, it is an attempt to explain the possibility of social change, and in this context the subject is conceptualized as the site of reiteration of the norm that guarantees its relative stability, but also provides for its openness and alteration. Thus, the agency of the subject lies in this ability of reiteration.

The notion of *iterability* in Butler's use of the term is meant to describe what is the issue here from the perspective of the possibility of social change. It describes the functioning of the norms, their power over the subjects and the subject's dependency on the norms, but also the indigence of the norms that have no ontological status outside its instantiation by the subject, thus allowing for the agency of the subject to be the site of the alteration of the norms. Iterability is intended to explain both aspects, the relative stability of the norms as well as the possibility of their alteration. Iterability does not only imply that the norms can always be reiterated, but also that they must permanently be reiterated, because for the norms to sustain their function they must permanently be instantiated in and through the subject's agency. The stability of the norms is not linked to a specific ontological status, rather, it is the consequence of iterability, an iterability that at the same time inscribes the possibility of alteration into every reinstantiation of the norms. The relative stability of the norms is the consequence of that stabilization through iteration, it is the temporary result of iterability, an iterability that takes place as the subject's agency.

In the introduction of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler summarizes five consequences of the concept of performativity for the status of gender and the function of gender norms. These consequences again highlight the paradoxical status of performativity as warrantor for the relative stability of the norms, but also for the possibility of their alteration. The first consequence states that "gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes", thus linking performativity to the function of the hegemonic norms. The second implication is that "the account of agency conditioned by those very regimes of discourse/power cannot be conflated with voluntarism or individualism", performativity does not presuppose a free and choosing will, but a subject that acts under conditions of its prior subordination under power, a subordination that nevertheless does not determine its actions, but enables it to be the site of alteration. The third aspect deals with the "materiality of sex", stating that performativity also involves a materialization of the norms. Hegemonic norms are materialized in and through performativity, not only in the bodies of the subjects, but also in institutionalized settings,

thus involving consequences that go far beyond self practices of the subject or the level of linguistic practices. The final two aspects elaborate in more details about the status of agency. The forth consequence states that "the materialization of the norms requires those identificatory processes by which norms are assumed or appropriated, and these identifications precede and enable the formation of a subject", that is to say, the agency of the subject is precisely invoked as the site of the instantiation of the norms. The final aspect highlights that this instantiation can never be completed, but reaches its certain limits within the subjects agency, which Butler in this text marks especially in the body of the subject: "the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where the abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as 'bodies' " (BM 15). In conclusion, we can state that Butler's notion of performativity wants to give an account of the subject's agency under hegemonic conditions, an agency that is derived from a invoking subordination under the norms, but which is at the same time also the place for the stabilization and alteration of those very norms.

Iterability, Hegemony and Agency

In this subsection, the focus will be on the functioning of the norms and the iterability of the norms in and through the agency of the subject. In this context, a chapter from Butler's *Excitable Speech* will be discussed, in which she investigates into the social conditions of performativity. It is an attempt to conflate Derrida's notion of iterability (developed in the context of a philosophy of language) with a theory of hegemony (as discussed in the previous chapter) and an account of bodily practices (which Butler draws from Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*).

Performativity has often been seen as focussed on the linguistic level only, thus overlooking that Butler does not restrict her account to linguistic practices, indeed, that they are maybe not even the most important ones for her, since bodily practices likely play the biggest role in Butler's notion of performativity.[70] In the debate with Laclau and Žižek, Butler states: "I am, I believe, more concerned to rethink performativity as cultural ritual, as the reiteration of cultural norms, as the habitus of the body in which structural and social dimensions of meaning are not finally separable" (RU 29). And in the 1999 preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble,* she writes: "The notion of the ritual dimension of

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70 Diana Coole tries to develop a notion of a phenomenological agency that follows from an account of embodiment (Coole 2005). I think that a lot could be gained from a further investigation in this field. In this context, I see huge potential for a conflation of Butler's notion of performativity with a phenomenological account of embodiment. Unfortunately, I cannot deal with this subject in the course of this inquiry.

performativity is allied with the notion of the habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's work, something which I only came to realize after the fact of writing this text" (GT 206 (8)).

Butler sees the strength of Pierre Bourdieu's contribution in the fact that he offers an "account of how norms become embodied, suggesting that they craft and cultivate the *habitus* of the body" (ES 142). But she is also critical of his account: "What Bourdieu fails to understand, however, is how what is bodily in speech resists and confounds the very norms by which it is regulated." (ES 142) In other words, Bourdieu offers a very convincing account of the inscriptions of norms onto the body, but his underdeveloped theory of speech – it is important to notice that Butler puts emphasis on the bodily dimensions of any speech act and that she additionally insists on including bodily utterances in the notion of speech – fails to account for the resistance of the subject and, thus, fails to give an explanation of social change.

Bourdieu and Derrida both refer to Austin's theory of performative utterances, thus, their imaginary discussion – it is Butler who brings the two together – is also a question of how to read Austin. The main area of disagreement is the question of the distinction of performative utterances that work and those that fail to work. For Bourdieu, the success or failure of a performative act is solely a consequence of the conventions that make it possible and especially the status of the utterer to have the power to perform the act. If the setting is according to the conventions and the utterer is empowered to do what he does, then the performative utterance will be successful. Derrida, in contrast, points out that the possibility of failure is generally inscribed into any performative utterance. The performative act only works, because – paradoxically speaking – it also has the possibility to fail.

The background of this disagreement is formed by very different account of the status of the conventions. In Bourdieu's view, the conventions are socially fixed and precede any performative act without being affected by it. Derrida, on the other hand, insists that the conventions do not have a status independently of their reevocation in the performative act. The conventions need to be instantiated – in Derrida's words we could also say: cited – in and through the performative utterance to gain and keep their status. As a consequence, the status of the convention is not indifferent to the failure of an utterance, rather, the possibility of failure affects the convention itself. Conventional formulas can be cited wrong or can be invoked by people who are not authorized to do so, and these wrong or unauthorized citations can also entail certain effects, effects that are not governed by the convention and therefore undermine its status and work on their transformation. Butler summarizes this discussion in the following way:

The possibility of a resignification of the ritual is based on the prior possibility that a formula can break with its originary context, assuming meanings and functions for which it was never intended. In making social institutions static, Bourdieu fails to grasp the logic of iterability that governs the possibility of social transformation. By understanding the false or wrong invocations as *reiterations*, we see how the form of social institutions undergoes change and alteration and how an invocation that has no prior legitimacy can have the effect of challenging existing forms of legitimacy, breaking open the possibility for future forms. […]

Significantly, the very iterability of the performative that Bourdieu fails to see is what preoccupies the reading of Austin that Derrida provides. For Derrida, the force of the performative is derived precisely from its decontextualization, from its break with a prior context and its capacity to assume new contexts. (ES 147)

In contrast to Bourdieu, Derrida has the major advantage of being able to provide an explanation for the possibility of alteration. But Butler critically adds that she also sees a serious shortcoming in Derrida's contribution, which is located in the fact that he grants alteration with a kind of ontological status. The problem is that "Derrida focuses on those ostensibly 'structural' features of the performative that persist quite apart from any and all social contexts" (ES 148). For Derrida, any sign must have the possibility to break with its origin in order to be a sign. In other words, the status of a sign implies that it must remain a sign even when departed from its original context. We have to remember that Derrida's notion of iterability is developed in the context of a theory of linguistics. In the context of linguistics, Butler does not want criticize to him. But Butler warns us that when transferred to a social level, Derrida's conception involves a certain blindness. This blindness occurs because Derrida does not account for the social fact that there are established conventions that make certain performative acts possible and inhibit others, that there is a certain hegemonic setting that determines what is possible and what is not. Even though the iterability of the norms puts into question the status of these conventions as stable and fixed, we nevertheless have to account for their relative stability and persistence. Thus, Derrida's notion of iterability offers a convincing explanation of the possibility of change, but he fails to present a theory of the social conditions – and, more importantly, the social obstacles – for change. For Derrida, iterability "has a structural status that appears separable from any consideration of the social" (ES 148), thus seems to have a blind spot when it comes to the investigation of existing power structures that govern the field of the socially possible.

In conclusion, Butler argues for a theory that tries to link together the conceptions of Bourdieu and Derrida: "The question of what constitutes the 'force' of the performative, however, can be adequately answered by neither formulation, although both views, taken together, gesture toward a theory of the social iterability of the speech act" (ES 152). The

crucial questions are: Is everything iterable to the same extend? Are all iterations equally valid? What are the social conditions of iterability? What is actually possible, here and now, in our specific hegemonic situation? Which power relations and norms make change possible and which ones hinder it? These question are all within the realm of Butler's theoretical innovation. But there are also additional questions that we have to ask critically about Butler's own conception.

First of all, especially from the perspective of the political scientist, we have to ask: Can a notion of iterability – even if enhanced by consideration of the body and a theory of hegemony – really explain the relative stability and persistence of existing power relations? I certainly want to suggest that the answer has to be yes, but I also want to point to certain shortcomings of Butler that are very striking when receiving her in the field of political theory. First, Butler seems to lack any account of political and social institutions. Even worse, she does not only lack an account of these institutions, she furthermore seems to misunderstand their status. This is especially obvious in Butler's discussion of censorship in *Excitable Speech*, which is based on an extremely poor conception of the state, a conception that can neither account for the formation of the state, nor for its inner complexity, nor for the unique status of the state within society. This is connected to the second shortcoming, namely that Butler does not provide for any account of concrete historical conditions of emergence of certain cultural and institutional settings. I want to be very careful at this point, because I believe that Butler's notion of performativity and iterability offers – on a theoretical level – a very convincing explanation for the historical and cultural contingency of norms and institutions as well as for their stability. When it comes to the task of a concrete investigations into the emergence of these settings, however, Butler's account appears strangely thin and weak. Thus, when applying Butler's notion of performativity and iterability in the field of political science, it seems to me that it is, first, important to develop its conflation with a theory of hegemony more explicit and elaborated than Butler herself does. That allows us to highlight its critical potential. Second, it is necessary to supplement Butler's notion of performativity and iterability with a corresponding theory of political institutions that fills the void in Butler's account. Third, the task is to historically contextualize it in order to make it applicable for investigations of concrete cultural and historical settings.

Subversiveness

The second critical request is concerned with the questions of social evaluation and moral

judgement. The questions are: Are all iterations equally desirable? Or is there a distinction between iterations that can be affirmed and those that have to be refused? In the light of a critical political project, which iterations have to be supported, which need to be dismissed? How can such a distinction be made? How can those iterations that have a subversive effect be detected and distinguished from other iterations that cause conservative effects?

There is a general agreement that something is wrong with Butler's notion of subversion, that it involves severe problems that are highly worrying (Lorey 1996, 42; Nussbaum 1999, 9; Salih 2002, 95, 97 and 115f.; Lloyd 2005, 148 Distelhorst 2007, 33; Chambers/Carver 2008, 138ff. and Thiem 2008, 207). In a nutshell, the main issue that all these critics point to is the following: Iterability is not subversive in itself, iterations can just as likely take on conservative forms. Whereas most critics agree that there are subversive and conservative iterations and that the problem is only the distinction of the two forms, there are also some that go further and argue that there is no reason why an iteration should be subversive after all, or, at least, that Butler does not provide such a reason. Alison Stone[71] shows that this was already an important topic in the discussion in *Feminist Contentions*. She summarizes that Benhabib and Fraser focussed on two aspects, "(1) whether Butler can adequately explain *how* subversion is possible, and (2) whether she can satisfactorily explain *why* subversion is desirable, or ought to be practiced" (Stone 2005, 14). Stone suggests that Butler provides a convincing answer to the first question – and the discussion of iterability in the present inquiry should be enough of a proof here – but that the same cannot be said about the second question. In other words, she claims that Butler develops a strong account of subversion, but that she fails to give an account of the ethical judgments that she nevertheless makes:

> This means, however, that Butler continues to need an account of why, in general, it is better to subvert and democratize entrenched and exclusive norms. That this account must be cast in a culturally specific lexicon, and must be fallible and contestable, does not affect the fact that Butler needs some such (fallible, specific) account to justify her normative claims – claims that recur whichever level of theoretical analysis she operates at (Stone 2005, 17).

To overcome this problem in Butler's theory, Stone suggests reading Butler together with a theory of genealogy. She especially refers to Nietzsche in this context and tries to highlight the materialist aspects of Nietzsche's genealogy. She claims more precisely that Nietzsche's notion of 'bodily forces' might help to fill the normative void in Butler's account (Stone 2005, 17ff.). Stone's proposal is certainly worth discussion, but we have to take into

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71 Alison Stone is a British philosopher. She is currently senior lecturer in the department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University.

account – as she herself points out in a self-critique at the end of her paper – that this is clearly an adaptation of Butler's theory and that Butler would have severe problems with the notion of 'bodily forces' (Stone 2005, 20f.).

Therefore, I want to go back to a discussion of Butler. In my opinion, the critics of Butler often overlook or ignore that Butler's notion of iterability and performativity certainly wants to serve as a theory of agency in its whole complexity, and not only as a theory of subversion. What Butler writes about iterability and performativity has to be applied to any iteration, not only to subversive ones. We could even go as far as to say that Butler's theory is located prior to the distinction of conservative and subversive forms of iterations, that it is actually forming the very possibility of this distinction. It is, therefore, already a limited approach to Butler's theory if we consider it only in the light of the question of subversion and resistance, as this is often the case.[72]

Still, the question remains and Butler even asks it herself: "What constitutes a subversive repetition within signifying practices of gender" (GT 199)? The contextualization of the question within the realm of gender is not only caused by the specific concern of *Gender Trouble*, it might also indicate that the question: what constitutes a subversive iteration? always has to be asked within a specific cultural setting and cannot be answered at a level independent of all cultural conditions. But still, the question remains and Butler can justifiably be asked to provide for an answer. In *Contingent Foundations*, Butler explicitly refers to Fraser's question, why resignification should be seen as a good, but she – just as explicitly – refuses to provide an answer. It seems that in her refusal to answer the question she implicitly suggests that the question was misleading or wrong, appearing almost offended that somebody dares to raise this question. She writes: "My question is not whether certain kinds of signification are good or bad, warranted or unwarranted, but, rather: what constitutes the domain of discursive possibility within which and about which such questions can be posed" (CR 138)? But, accepting all these precautions, we still have to insist on the question: What – under the given cultural settings, in the hegemonic situation we are located in and in the language dominated by the current norms – allows for a distinction of a subversive iteration from a conservative one?

It seems that we have to accept that Butler cannot provide for an answer, and, in fact, is not even willing to do so. However, I want to suggest that there is a criterion to be found in Butler's theory that enables us to distinguish between conservative and subversive iterations. We can see this criterion if we reconsider the notion of subversion in the light of

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72 Thiem formulates a similar argument (Thiem 2008, 87f.).

Butler's aim of denaturalization. She writes in *Gender Trouble* that "the repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories" (GT 43). Thus, we can conclude that denaturalization can serve as the criterion for the subversiveness of a performative act. In other words: an iteration of the norm is subversive if it shows the non-natural status of the norm and thereby works on denaturalizing and destabilizing it. Lloyds interpretation of Butler focusses on this aspect, designating denaturalization as the main political action in Butler's theory. In connection with the question of the normative dimension of Butler's theory, she even states that denaturalization is valuable in itself and serves as the normative 'foundation' of Butler's work (Lloyd 2005, 176). Thus, it seems that the commitment to the radical ungroundedness, contingency and constitutive openness of all social formations is the ethical bottom line of Butler's work that we have to accept. However, I am still not convinced and agree with Thiem:

> Yet it seems to me to that with this move to openness as a normative criterion, if we left the consideration at that point, we would run into the problem either that this account remains too formalistic or that the ultimate normative criterion turns out to be settled with this openness (and thus no longer open for discussion), leaving the question theoretically settled but retaining the normative dimension only as a practical question of application and implementation (Thiem 2008, 279 (22)).

In more recent writings, Butler also seems to see the insufficiency that lies in the implicit reference to openness and contingency as normative criteria. Indeed, it seems that she has changed her mind about this question and now suggests herself that – even though denaturalization is an important task – it is not sufficient as an account for subversive political action.

> Which action is right to pursue, which innovation has value, and which does not? The norms that we would consult to answer this question cannot themselves be derived from resignification. They have to be derived from a radical democratic theory and practice; resignification has to be contextualized in that way (UG 224).

In her recent writings, Butler continues to insist that criteria cannot be settled formally. But instead of the refusal to even allow for the question about criteria, she now suggests that they have to be derived from concrete, contextualized political contexts. That, of course, implies that the criteria keep their contingent, contextual status that links them inextricably to their origin. Hence, contingency and openness still play a significant role, because they form the requirement for the settlement over criteria in an contingent and open context. But Butler is clear now that contingency and openness are not themselves the criteria and that criteria cannot be derived from them in a formal way either. I agree with Thiem about the strength of Butler's account:

The force of Butler's argument lies, in my opinion, in her insistence that criteria and norms cannot be settled in advance or apart from understanding all criteria, norms, and normative aspirations as politically and historically conditioned. If this situation presents a theoretical impasse, it is one because on the one hand we have a limited perspective, while on the other hand there is the aspiration not to settle for a thorough relativism. In other words, we have nothing but contingent grounds, historically and socially conditioned knowledge, and so there is nothing that can function as criteria in a way that could adjudicate between different claims of what ought to be done (Thiem 2008, 209).

The main objection against this interpretation might be that it leads to a version of cultural relativism. But Thiem argues that this is not the case, because such a cultural relativism itself knows already too much about the status of different claims. Thus, she concludes that "only if one refuses the retreat into relativism does it become possible to take seriously how positions conflict with each other and deny each other's validity" (Thiem 2008, 209). This is a very difficult matter which will be revised in the following chapter. But first, it is necessary to go into Butler's remarks on subversiveness and subversive acts in more detail.

Drag and Parody

Parody and drag are often seen as the paradigmatic cases of subversive acts, especially because of the central discussion of these performances towards the end of *Gender Trouble* (GT 175ff.). But in *Bodies that Matter,* Butler clarifies that her account of drag might not be just as central as some of the readers expected:

Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic gender norms (BM 125).

These statements are made in the context of Butler's discussion of the movie *Paris is burning*. Butler writes that this movie "calls into question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be a very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms" (BM 125). She also admits that there is a wide variety of drag performances, drag is for example not always an expression of homosexual rebellion against the heterosexual, "there are forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself" (BM 126). To conclude, Butler argues that drag cannot *per se* be seen as a subversive performance, but nevertheless continues to argue that her discussion of drag in *Gender Trouble* made a good point:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarism, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealization. […] In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality (BM 125).

Subversiveness has to be considered in connection with a specific hegemonic situation, a performance is only subversive in relation to hegemonic norms, thus it always needs to be contextualized. In the case of drag that means that not all forms of drag are subversive. Butler certainly suggests that there are forms of drag that can be and will be subversive, but it would be wrong to say that drag is *per se* subversive. Thus, we have to distinguish between forms of drag that are subversive and others that are not. Already in *Gender Trouble*, Butler formulated the decisive question: "And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire" (GT 189)?[73] The criterion for the distinction is the same as the one we have already seen in the previous discussion of subversiveness in Butler's earlier writings. Performances are subversive if they serve the purpose of denaturalization and destabilization of hegemonic norms.

The situation in the case of parody is similar to the status of drag. Butler states clearly that parody is not *per se* subversive, that there can also be parodies that stabilizes the given configurations.

> Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were. […] And yet this failure to become 'real' and to embody 'the natural' is, I would argue, a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable (GT 200).

In other words, parody – just as drag – is subversive if it manages to show that not only the parody is a copy of the supposedly natural, but that the supposedly natural itself functions as a copy, and, as a consequence, that there is no natural after all. Butler adds an additional argument here, when she writes that the reason that a parody can be successful with this task is that it is principally impossible to enact the natural. 'The natural' is – as Butler names it – 'an ontological locale' – and as such 'fundamentally uninhabitable'. In other words, nobody can be 'the natural' because it is simply impossible to be the natural. Parody is distinguished because it is the performance that understands this failure to inhabit the natural that is inherent to all practices. Therefore, Butler can speak of the "subversive laugher […] of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects" (GT 200). The notion of the 'subversive laugher' is a very strong image of the superiority of parody at this point. Butler's explanation, however, is

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73 In this quote, Butler employs the crucial distinction between performance and performativity, to which she, however, does not always stick in *Gender Trouble*. To repeat the distinction once again: Performance is the name for a single act that intends to evoke what it says or does. Performativity, in contrast, involves the contingency of all norms and identities and their openness and dependency on iterability, which also implies the permanent possibility of alteration.

partly mistaken. It is not the case that the original is constituted as an effect in parody, rather, parody only unveils that the original has always already been an effect. In other words, parody is subversive to the extent that it points to the fact that there is nothing like a original, that we are left with a collection of more or less powerful, more or less accepted enactments that pretend to be the original.

In the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains that she is "not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive" and she goes on stating that she is convinced that "such judgments cannot be made out of context" and "that they cannot be made in ways that endure through time" (GT xxii). Thus, she concludes that "the effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (GT xxiii). For the reader of *Gender Trouble* this has the already familiar consequence: "The discussion of drag that *Gender Trouble* offers to explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely *an example* of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency" (GT xxiii). For the purpose of this inquiry it is important to highlight this last statement. Subversive performances such as drag are not the model of political agency, which Butler wants to defend. Butler's concept of agency cannot be reduced to a notion of subversive performance. A notion of agency is – I feel a need to repeat myself at this point – not the purpose of her discussion of drag.

What, then, is the actual purpose of Butler's discussion of drag? She clarifies in the 1999 preface: "The point of this text is not to celebrate drag as the expression of a true and model gender, […] but to show that the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality" (GT xxiv). On the following page, she is even clearer: "The purpose of the example is to expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms" (GT xxv). The purpose of Butler's employment of subversive performances can only be understood in connection with here investigation of normativity and normative violence. In this light, subversive performances not only function to denaturalize and destabilize hegemonic norms, but also to counter the violence exercised by those norms. If subversiveness can be linked to the general project of a contestation of hegemony, it loses its arbitrariness and gets contextualized through a genealogy of hegemony. It is clear, then, that no act can be subversive in itself, but only in relation to a certain context determined by the hegemonic norms. What counts as subversive act can only be decided in each and every individual case, and it may not only depend on the specific norm that is supposed to be subverted, but also on the

agent that performs the act, the audience receiving it, the situation in which the act takes place *et cetera*.

The Role of Ethics

The statement that "the effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (GT xxiii) and more general Butler's refusal to name any ethical criteria nevertheless causes many critics to wonder about the normative dimension of Butler's work. The question is: Can something like an ethics or at least an ethical dimension be found in Butler's work? And if not, does Butler offer a justification for her refusal to provide such a dimension? Is her justification convincing?

Butler responded to the critique that she lacks a normative dimension in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*. Butler first notes that 'normative' has at least two meanings. In the first instance, which is the one Butler usually uses, 'normative' refers to the 'functioning of the norm'. In this sense, 'normative violence' can be synonymous with 'violence of the norm'. In the second meaning, which is – apart from Butler – far more common, 'normative' refers to questions of 'ethical justification' (GT xxi). Butler is regularly concerned with normativity in the first sense, but just as regularly disregards the question of the normative dimension in the second sense.[74]

But after this clarification of the terminology, I want to return to the question: Is there something like an ethical dimension in the second sense to be found in *Gender Trouble*? Butler answers:

> It is not possible to oppose the 'normative' forms of gender without at the same time subscribing to a certain normative view of how the gendered world ought to be. I want to suggest, however, that the positive normative vision of this text, such as it is, does not and cannot take the form of a prescription (GT xxii).

For Butler, a genealogy of gender norms cannot be based on a prescription of gender, as it ought to be, because in Butler's view such a prescription would again evoke a notion of the norm that limits the field of the livable and causes violent effects on those that are excluded from the norm. As a consequence Butler suggests the following distinction:

> [A] *descriptive* account of gender includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas a *normative* account seeks to answer the question of which expressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not, supplying persuasive reasons to distinguish between such expressions in this way (GT xxii).

Butler is clearly concerned with the first account, but tries to avoid the second. To justify

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74 In this inquiry the term normative is – following Butler's use of the word – usually used in the first sense – as has hopefully been understandable out of the context so far. To make the distinction clear, the term 'ethical' is used to refer to the normative dimension in the second sense.

her decision, she seems to present a couple of arguments. First, she argues that the normative account of gender in fact presupposes a descriptive account, because the normative judgement is based on a description of the forms of gender that appear. In other words, a normative judgement requires a set of given forms that can be judged. Thus, the normative account presupposes an inquiry of the conditions of the appearance of gender itself (GT xxii). Second, Butler argues that the descriptive account cannot entirely be separated from the normative dimension. "The question, however, of what qualifies as 'gender' is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power […]. Thus, the very description of the field of gender is in no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation " (GT xxii). However, this second argument has to be rejected, because Butler uses the homonymous character of the two notions of 'normative' here to trick her reader. This sentence only makes sense if the notion of 'normative' in it refers to 'the functioning of the norm', however, that was not what the argument pretended to present, since we expected an argument about the ethical dimension of the text. Instead of openly refusing to answer questions about the ethical dimension of her work – as in her early writings – Butler now seems to try to trick her way around answering it.

The main problem with Butler's reluctance to engage with ethical questions is that she nevertheless makes ethical claims herself. As she suggests herself, it might be necessary to do so; it could be that even a project of denaturalization and genealogy is impossible without subscribing to some kind of normative view. For example, Butler's aim to make the lives of those whose lives are not considered worth living livable is certainly such an ethical claim. However, Butler is highly reluctant to make this fact explicit. Her reservation towards any kind of ethics makes it impossible for her to designate her own ethical claims as such. As a consequence, she pretends to be able to ignore the need of an ethical justification of her own claims.

However, I want to argue at the same time that this reservation about ethics can also be seen as a strength of Butler's theory, if we interpret it as a sign for Butler's commitment to a racially political project. Already the heading of the conclusion of *Gender Trouble* is a sign for this destination of Butler's theory: "From Parody to Politics" (GT 194). In a discussion with William Connolly[75], Butler says accordingly: "I tend to think that ethics displaces from politics, and I suppose for me the use of power as a point of departure for a critical analysis is substantially different from an ethical framework" (Butler/Connolly

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75 William Connolly is an American political theorist. He is currently the Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University.

2000, 5). As I have already cited, Butler claims that criteria need to be "derived from a radical democratic theory and practice" (UG 224). These statements point towards Butler's anchoring in politics, her engagement in a political project and her aim to account for new political opportunities. However, the question of the role of ethics and politics in Butler's theory and the reservations concerning the status of Butler's own ethical claims require a closer examination in the light of Butler's more recent writings. This will be one of the topics of the following chapter.

9. The Limits of Identity and the Ethics of Critique

If we have a look at Butler's publications in the new millennium, it seems justifiable to speak of a 'turn to politics' in Butler's work. Beginning with *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, which is Butler's discussion of the consequences of 9/11, the war on terror and the Iraq war, Butler wrote several books such as *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*[76] that deal with obvious political question. Additionally, *Giving An Account of Oneself*[77] is often seen as the central text that indicates that this 'turn to politics' is accompanied by a 'turn to ethics'. However, I want to follow Chambers and Carver and claim that these turns are in fact no real turns after all (Chambers/Carver 2008, 92). First, I want to argue that Butler's work has always been oriented towards politics, and that her more recent writings – despite the apparent topics they are dealing with – have rather weakened than strengthened this link. Second, I want to defend the claim that if an ethics were to be found in Butler's work – and in my opinion this is still an unsettled question – than it was not introduced in her recent writings, but has been there from the very beginning. Against this second claim, one might argue that one at least has to admit that this ethics remained latent in all the early writings and became more explicit only in the more recent writings. I certainly agree with this interjection, yet, I want to add two further comments . First, I think that this explication of Butler's ethics in the recent writings is most notably due to a change in terminology,

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76 It is a significant shortcoming of the present inquiry that it does not take this latest book by Butler into account. This is due to the fact that I have not read it until the final stages of the writing process. I can only add here that the reading of this book would force me to rewrite chapter nine of this inquiry, or at least force me to add a subsection on Butler's most recent development. It seems to me that Butler has reacted to several of the problems in her texts of the beginning of the decade – problems that will be discussed in this chapter – in this most recent publication. On the other hand, the first reading of *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* suggest that it is clearly supporting the main line of interpretation of Butler's work presented in the present inquiry.

77 This book is a revised and extended version of the text which is based on the Adorno-lectures that Butler gave in Frankfurt in November 2002, and which was published in German in 2003 with the title *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt*.

and, second, I am afraid that – if this change is actually a change –is is quite problematic, because it intensifies Butler's departure from politics.

The shift in Butler's language from an investigation of discourse to an inquiry of the norm was discussed in the previous chapter. Again drawing from Chambers and Carver, we can look at this shift in terminology more general and highlight two of its main aspects. First, in *Giving An Account of Oneself* Butler develops her argument in the language of 'moral philosophy'. In this context, Chambers and Carver argue that, on the one hand, the arguments which Butler presents in this book are in line with her overall project, which she has been following at least from *Gender Trouble* on. But, on the other hand, they have the suspicion that something was lost with the adoption of this new language, namely, this new language comes at the cost of a displacement from politics (Chambers/Carver 2008, 97). To put it another way, the adoption of the language of 'moral philosophy' in *Giving An Account of Oneself* is not a sign of Butler's 'turn to politics', but, on the contrary, it actually leads away from politics. Paradoxically, I want to suggest that precisely in this context it becomes most apparent why Butler should be read as a *political* theorist in the sense of the strong claim that was put forward in chapter one.

Second, in *Giving An Account of Oneself* it becomes also apparent that Butler moves away from "a discourse – common in most of her early works (and particularly in the *Psychic Life of Power*) – that mixes together the terms of Foucault with those of psychoanalytic theory, on to a new and distinct language of ontology" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 106). On the one hand, this is again merely a shift in language, but, on the other hand, her new language of ontology is also an indication of a more relevant relocation of her work. In *Giving An Account of Oneself* we can detect the emergence of an ontology of the self. This emerging ontology causes certain troubles for our interpretation of Butler's work, because it is clearly in conflict with important aspects of Butler's writings of the 1990s, while, at the same time, it might imply Butler's return to her own origins, namely the French reception of Hegel and an existentialist interpretation of phenomenology.

The Limits of Identity

In *Giving an account of oneself*, Butler – drawing from several authors, such as Nietzsche and Foucault but also Adorno and Levinas – investigates into the dimension of account-giving. She begins with a discussion of the narrative form that such an account takes and the interaction of such a narration with the question of moral agency. Usually, we believe that it is our accountability and responsibility as moral agents that forms the basis of moral

conduct. Butler, however, argues that we cannot presuppose accountability and responsibility, but that we have to consider the conditions of their emergence. She claims that "narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one's actions through that means" (GA 12). Butler is especially interested in the limits of the ability to give an account of oneself. *Giving an Account of Oneself* is actually for most parts an investigation into the limits of account-giving. She detects these limits in at least four instances: our own body, our unconsciousness, the primary relationality to others, and the embedding into language and the norm. I want to take a brief look at these four limits.

First, Butler points out that when I want to give an account of myself, "there is a bodily referent, a condition of me that I can point to, but that I cannot narrate precisely" (GA 38). "The singular body to which a narration refers cannot be captured by a full narration", and the main reason is that "the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection" (GA 20). My body has a history that I cannot recollect, but that nevertheless was formative for who I have become. I can and have to say that this body I am referring to in my account was *my* body, but I cannot give a narrative account of this body that was mine. Even though there might be stories about this body, "the stories do not capture the body to which they refer" and we have to come to the conclusion that "the history of this body is not fully narratable" (GA 38). Butler summarizes her conclusive insight very concise: "To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection" (GA 38). Every account of oneself has to account for the history of oneself's body that is never fully accountable, thus, it has to account for the very limit of accountability.

Actually, this is not only true of my body, but it is also the case if I try to give an account of my emergence as a conscious self. In this case I am also confronted with "a limit to what the 'I' can actually recount" (GA 66). Butler goes so far as to suggest that the 'I' is "the most ungrounded moment in the narrative. The one story that the 'I' cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an 'I' who not only speaks but comes to give an account of itself" (GA 66). The limit of the ability of the 'I' to give an account of its own emergence in Butler's view introduces a limit into the very accountability of the 'I':

> Indeed, I am introduced as one for whom no account can or will be given. I am giving an account of myself, but there is no account to be given when it comes to the formation of this speaking 'I' who would narrate its life. The more I narrate, the less accountable I prove to be. The 'I' ruins its own story, contrary to its best intentions (GA 67).

A third limit of account-giving is located in our primary relationality to others. This rela-

tionality has two aspects which are both not bound to the actual presence of other human beings at a given point of time. The first aspect is that "an account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing, and this other establishes the scene of address" (GA 21) in which an account has to be given, thus already setting a limit for any reflexive attempt to give an account. But we also have to consider the second forms:

> Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others, suggesting that these relations call upon primary forms of relationality that are not always available to explicit and reflective thematizations. If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency (GA 20).

That we are formed in primary relations to others that we cannot fully account for causes a "primary opacity" (GA 20) of the self. This opacity also has consequences for our encounter with others.

In the context of an encounter with others we also have to consider a fourth limit of our ability to give an account of oneself. Our encounter with others is always bound to a "language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms" (GA 30). But this dependency on a language is not only given in the relation to others, but in every attempt to give an account, because "the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms" (GA 21). Thus, every attempt to give an account has its possibility and its limits in the language it is given in, a language that it did not create and that brings along a set of norms that one has not chosen either.

A few pages later, Butler gives another enumeration of the limits of account-giving, which does not fully correspond with the one presented so far, but can nevertheless help to clarify matters:

> There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity [which is due to the fact that I have a body, G.T.], and there are (2) *primary relations*, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself [located both in my body and my unconsciousness; G.T.]. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the *structure of address* in which it takes place. (GA 39)

After the enumeration of these limits, it is important to notice that they do not serve a pejorative purpose, for Butler, these limitations are not merely negative. On the contrary, she claims that "a theory of subject formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can serve a conception of ethics and, indeed, responsibility" (GA 19). In the discus-

sion with Connolly in 2000 she suggests that the question is "whether a new sense of ethics emerges from that inevitable ethical failure" and her answer is a decisive affirmation of such a possibility:

> I suppose that it does, and that it would center perhaps on a certain willingness to acknowledge the limits of acknowledgment itself, that when we claim to know and present ourselves, we will fail in some ways that are nevertheless essential to who we are, and that we cannot expect anything different from others (Butler/Connolly 2000, 6).

In her book *Unbecoming Subject*, Thiem presents an important argument that follows the direction in which Butler is moving here, as she tries to bring together impulses from post-structuralism and moral philosophy. She summarizes that "while theorist drawing on post-structuralism have been rediscovering ethics for several years now, the normative aspect of ethics seems to remain beyond what can be easily reappropriated". On the other hand, "moral philosophers have tended to view poststructuralism with great suspicion at best, and for the most part appear to have chosen to ignore it entirely". In this context, what Thiem wants to present is a "rethinking of moral philosophy through the challenges posed to it by Butler's work, especially on subject formation" (Thiem 2008, 2). While this is certainly a very intriguing task – and I think that Thiem articulates many very good arguments that not only help to clarify Butler's work, but also present a significant contribution to the question of the possibility of a moral philosophy based on poststructuralist insights – I do not want to deal with this project here. Instead, I want to highlight the main purpose that an acknowledgment of the limits of account-giving eventually serves in the context of Butler's political project.

Butler writes that ethical violence – Butler speaks of ethical violence instead of normative violence in *Giving an Account of Oneself,* I think that this is meant to indicate that moral norms function like others norms in a way that can exercise violence on those that cannot live according to the norms – is often caused by the demand to "manifest and maintain self identity at all time". If this is the case, "suspending the demand for self-identity, or, more particularly, for complete coherence" (GA 42) can be a way to counter this specific ethical violence. I am convinced that this statement leads to a political project rather than an ethics, nevertheless, one has to wonder what ethical assumptions this project eventually involves.

Butler's Ethical Task

In the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*, Butler highlights what might be won by the the subversion of gender norms: "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of prolifer-

ating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonist: 'man' and 'woman'" (GT 200).

Distelhorst showed that there are several problems with this statement. First, we must think that Butler refers to gender norms in their present form in this sentence, because it would make no sense, and even contradict everything Butler has written elsewhere, if she really wanted to suggests that we could get rid of all gender norms. Second, it is all but clear which aim Butler actually wants to set forth here. We have to consider that, on the one hand, a proliferation of gender configurations does not necessarily require a deprivation of the existing categories ('men' and 'women'). On the other hand, we have to be aware that, if a proliferation should add up to the abolition of existing categories, then it is not a mere proliferation, but an invention of new configurations (Distelhorst 2007, 240).

The problem that presents itself here is basically the same as the one we have already seen in connection with the questions about the status of the outside and the criteria for subversiveness. In a certain way, these problems coincide with each other in the question about the ethical task that forms the background of Butler's work. Is the aim merely the diversification of the norms in a way that allows the ones that are outside the norm now to also be included in it in a future that has to be envisioned as more inclusive? Or is the aim a radical overthrow of the norms that intents to modify them entirely and leads to their complete reconfiguration? The decision between the two options is linked to the question of the criteria that allow to measure subversiveness. But more importantly, it is linked to the question of the ethical foundation of the desire for alteration. I think that it is fair to say that there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding this aspect of Butler's approach.

I suggest going back to the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, because Butler seems to intend to clarify matters in this text. However, as I want to show, her clarification, in fact, only reproduces the same ambiguity. At one point, Butler writes that "the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibility ought to be realized" (GT viii). But does that mean that the aim is a radical transformation of all gender norms or that it is merely the expansion of the existing norms so that they can include the ones that are excluded? A few pages later, Butler gives a clear answer to this question: "If there is a positive normative task in *Gender Trouble*, it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, unintelligible" (GT xxv). In this sentence it becomes perfectly clear that the normative task of *Gender Trouble* is the expansion of gender norms – the first option described above. Butler

links this aim to her concern about normative violence, stating that it is meant "to counter the violence performed by gender norms" (GT xxv). And she makes that link even clearer when she writes: "The dogged effort to 'denaturalize' gender in this text emerges, I think, from a strong desire [...] to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex" (GT xxi), thereby reinvoking this link between the fight against normative violence and the aim of a proliferation of the norms.

However, if we also consider other essays, which Butler wrote around the time of the 1999 preface, matters do not remain as clear any longer. In her second contribution to the discussion with Laclau and Žižek, for example, Butler concludes with the following statement:

> Indeed, the task will be not an assimilate the unspeakable into the domain of speakability in order to house it there, within the existing norms of dominance, but to shatter the confidence of dominance, to show how equivocal its claims to universality are, and, from that equivocation, track the break-up of its regime, an opening towards alternative versions of universality that are wrought from the work of translation itself (CU 179).

In this passage, Butler clearly states that an effort which only aims at including the excluded ones does certainly not reach far enough and that a transformation of the norms to make them more inclusive cannot be the final aim of our efforts. Butler suggests here that the aim must be a complete shake-up of the norms that does not settle for a transformation with the goal of a proliferation, in other words, she claims that the status of the norm most be entirely subverted.

Thus, we are again confronted with the same ambiguity, which becomes even more obvious in *Undoing Gender* and eventually runs through this whole text. First, Butler writes that "the task of all of these movements seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself" (UG 8). One might wonder where the criteria for this evaluation come from. Maybe Butler can counter that it is the task of the movements themselves to also develop the criteria for the distinction, which is in line with her statement that the norms "have to be derived from a radical democratic theory and practice" (UG 224). Only a few sentences further, however, Butler actually prescribes a criterion for the evaluation, while paradoxically at the same time insisting on the situatedness of the critique: "The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death" (UG 8). It is again all but clear at this point if Butler wants to suggest a transformation of gender norms or their

complete abolition, and the ambiguity becomes even more obvious when she continues: "What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some" (UG 8). Butler is fluctuating in the description of the ethical task of her work with such a consistency that one has to wonder if this ambiguity is in fact on purpose. Indeed, if we consider Butler's notion of performativity and iterability and the related model of subversiveness, we may have to admit that our question was misleading because a distinction between a reformatory and a revolutionary approach, like the one we have employed in our question, does not make sense within a Butlerian framework (Distelhorst 2007, 243). As we have seen in previous chapters, Butler argues that an alteration of the norm can only happen in and through its iteration. In this context, the norm is seen as never static, but always dependent on the stabilization through permanent iteration. As a consequence, the contestation, proliferation and reformulation of the norms as well as their stabilization go hand in hand in the iterability of the norms. Thus, the agent can neither be a reformer nor a revolutionary, because the concept of agency deprived from a notion of iterability does not allow for any of these figures. Both figures fail to comply with the fact that the agent is never in full control of the effects of his action, that the action has, so to say, its own life and causes – depending on the situation which is never fully transparent – effects that are unpredictable for the agent. Sometimes an action might effect a radical shift of the norm, at other times only a slight modification, and most of the times it will eventually have no effect after all. Thus, we cannot theoretically predict which effects an action might cause. Agency implies this lack of predictability. It is located in this permanent, unavoidable and unpredictable struggle with the norms and is bound back to the fact that the norm is not static, but itself dependent on its iterability that implies the permanent possibility of alteration.

Referring to this complex interdependency of agency and the norms, Butler said in an interview in 2008:

> Thus, gender performativity can be understood: the slow and difficult practice of producing new possibilities of experiencing gender in the light of history, and in the context of very powerful norms that restrict our intelligibility as human beings. They are complex struggles, political in nature, since they insist on new forms of recognition (Birulés 2008, w.p.).

And Butler seems to suggest in this context that a multi-level and multi-dimensional approach to this struggle with the norms is demanded.

> I would say that it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist. The genders I have in mind have been in existence for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality. So it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social, and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time. Because the norms governing reality have not admitted

these forms to be real, we will, of necessity, call them 'new' (UG 31).

In this passage we can see how the contestation, proliferation and reformulation of norms can work hand in hand in this struggle to make the lives of those that are suppressed by the norm – or, indeed, declared impossible or unreal – liveable as well.

But still, one might ask the question: Why is it actually a goal to make lives livable? What status does this goal have? Is it a moral obligation? Is it the expression of a political interest? Interestingly enough, Butler tries to delegitimize these questions in the 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble*, when she writes: "One might wonder what use 'opening up possibilities' finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is 'impossible,' illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question." (GT viii) But even though this question might actually seem provocative and maybe even cynical in the eyes of those in whose name Butler claims to speak, I think that it is nevertheless a legitimate questions, at least, I insist that it is illegitimate to delegitimize the question the way Butler does. It is important, however, that I do not present this argument in order to disagree with Butler's ethical claim, on the contrary, I want to support it. But I am convinced that if I want to justify my support, I cannot avoid questions about the ethical justification of this claim, because these questions rightfully demand an answer.

From Ethics to Politics

Lloyd detects a main tension in Butler's work – especially her more recent publications – between her critique of all ontological claims by showing that they are not natural but constructed and discursively imparted, "*and* her own unacknowledged ontological presuppositions" (Lloyd 2008, 92). Lloyd summarizes – in line with my reading of Butler – that Butler's major concerns are the different forms of normative violence, and she goes on to ask if it is "accurate to interpret this concern as an ethical rather than political concern" (Lloyd 2008, 102). For Lloyd it is clear that the answer has to be no. She refers to the conversation of Butler with Connolly in 2000, in which Butler – as I have cited in the previous chapter – after stating that she thinks that ethics tend to lead to a departure from politics goes on saying that "the use of power as a point of departure for a critical analysis" in her political approach "is substantially different from an ethical framework" (Butler/Connolly 2000, 5). Lloyd concludes that "this suggests to me that Butler would read her own work *prior to* 2000 as addressing *political* rather than ethical issues" (Lloyd

2008, 102). In a similar fashion Loizidou suggests that Butler's "philosophy of ethics is really a philosophy of politics or law" (Loizidou 2007, 47). While Loizidou admits that this claim can be disputed, she specifies that the critical impetus of Butler's work is that for her ethics is "not pre-political but rather emerge as matter of public and political concern"(Loizidou 2007, 47). In other words, the impulse that comes from Butler's approach is that she challenges ethics by showing, first, that any kind of ethics is itself politicized and, second, that a sharp distinction between ethics and politics leads to forms of ethical violence (Loizidou 2007, 48). Lloyd agrees with this interpretation, when she writes that Butler's strength is her concentration "on exploring how power circumscribes the kinds of ethical encounters that take place – how existing normative frames operate to regulate and determine who counts (and how they count), as well as who is realized in the process" (Lloyd 2008, 103). But Lloyd suggests that this is only one side of the story: "At the same time, however, she appears to take for granted the existence of the ethical imperative, by which I mean the factor or principle that makes possible the ethical encounter" (Lloyd 2008, 103). This ethical imperative lies in the ontological assumption that every individual has a desire to live and that, at the same time, there is some kind of (ethical) obligation to make lives (of others) livable. The problem is that "Butler argues *as if* the ethical imperative is *apolitical*" (Lloyd 2008, 103). The problem is that Butler does not even admit that this assumption is, indeed, an ethical imperative. Therefore, the question at stake here seems not to even appear for her. My suggestion is that, if this tension is to be dissolved, then this resolution can only be in the direction of politics.

In line with this suggestion is Butler's implicit demand for an ethics that is located within politics. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler suggests that it might be necessary to say "that the ethical demand gives rise to the political account, and that ethics undermines its own credibility when it does not become critique" (GA 124). In 2002, Butler wrote a very intriguing essay that presents a reading of Foucault's lecture *What is critique?*. Thiem is deeply influenced by this short essay in her attempt to connect Butler's poststructuralist approach with moral philosophy. In my reading of the essay, I want to follow Thiem's interpretation, but I will also make clear where I differ from it. In "What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue" Butler claims that Foucault's notion of "critique" is an important contribution to a "progressive political philosophy" (WC 212). She writes that she hopes to show "that Foucault not only makes an important contribution to normative theory, but that both his aesthetics and his account of the subject are integrally related to both ethics and politics" (WC 212). This is, indeed, a very intriguing claim, considering

that in the reception of Foucault there is usually an agreement that precisely the ethical dimension is highly underdeveloped in his work. In contrast to this reception, Butler suggests that the concept of critique "offers a new practice of values based on that very suspension" of ethical judgment (WC 212).

Matters might become clearer if we consider Butler's brief but coherent critique of an Habermasian approach to ethics. Butler begins with a summary of Habermas's criticism of the notion of critique:

> Habermas made the operation of critique quite problematic when he suggested that a move beyond critical theory was required if we are to seek recourse to norms in making evaluative judgments about social conditions and social goals. The perspective of critique, in his view, is able to call foundations into question, denaturalize social and political hierarchy, and even establish perspectives by which a certain distance on the naturalized world can be had. But none of these activities can tell us in what direction we ought to move, nor can they tell us whether the activities in which we engage are realizing certain kinds of normatively justified goals. Hence, in his view, critical theory had to give way to a stronger normative theory (WC 213).

We can see that the Habermasian criticism of critique is also relevant in the context of the present inquiry, because it shares several concerns about the ethical dimension in Butler's work that have been expressed here as well. Hence, Butler's answer to this criticism might also provide some solution for our concerns about Butler's approach. In her reply to Habermas, Butler writes that "in making this kind of criticism of critique, Habermas became curiously uncritical about the very sense of normativity he deployed. For the question 'what are we to do?' presupposes that the 'we' has been formed and that it is know, that its action is possible, and the field in which it might act is delimited" (WC 213f.). In other words, Butler's critique of Habermas's criticism of critique is that his own ethical approach presupposes a specific account of the subject – a subject with a fully coherent identity that is entirely familiar with its situatedness and the possibilities the specific situation offers. Butler continues with a critique of such an account of the subject, which we are already very familiar with. And she elaborates on the consequence for a critical theory: "But if those very formations and delimitations have normative consequences, then it will be necessary to ask after the values that set the stage for action, and this will be an important dimension of any critical inquiry into normative matters" (WC 214).

Thiem interprets that the main critical aim of Butler's approach is

> to understand and interrogate how questions of moral conduct are conditioned by social and historical circumstances and frameworks. More specifically, critique becomes central to moral philosophy insofar as social and historical contexts condition the form of moral conundrums, insofar in turn these contexts are determined through social norms and structures of power. Moral philosophy as a critical inquiry needs to examine how social norms and power determine situations within which moral questions arise and become available and urgent (Thiem 2008, 189).

By focussing on these contexts in which every moral conduct is situated, critique is located somewhere between epistemological critique and social criticism, in a way combining the two projects (Thiem 2008, 190). Butler describes "critique as a practice in which we pose the question of limits of our most sure ways of knowing" (WC 215). In this way, critique highlights the ways in which we run up against the epistemological and social limits of all knowingness, especially highlighting the incoherences of our knowledge that emerge at the borders, where the sphere of the intelligible and the constitutive outside are produced and conflict with each other (WC 215). Butler follows Foucault in the aspect that liberty – if we want to speak of this concept – "emerges at the limit of what one can know", when the question of the limits of our knowingness arises (WC 221). Thiem concludes that one consequence of critique is that it "scrutinizes the central and foundational role of the subject in contemporary accounts of moral philosophy" (Thiem 2008, 196), because a concept of the subject can not longer be presupposed as the foundation of moral conduct.

But, actually, in this essay on critique, Butler is by far not as critical and dismissing about the role of the subject as she was in her writings of the 1990s. She even speaks of a form of "self-transformation" (WC 217) which the subject has to conduct in relation of the norm, thus, focussing to a much greater extent on the role of the subject in this process of subject formation, which – in this new perspective – goes hand in hand with the subject's self-transformation.

The most important aspect of Butler's essay, however, is "the demand that ethical reflection become critical as well as political" (Thiem 2008, 201). In this context, Butler speaks of an "ethics within politics" (WC 215). "One could suggest that with critique's addressing questions of power and social, we are moving into the realm of politics and out of the realm of ethics", writes Thiem, but her main argument is "that these questions do not move us beyond the scope of ethics but instead importantly belong to ethics in the perspective of social ethics" (Thiem 2008, 201). Drawing from this impulse, Thiem develops the notion of a "political ethics" and distinguishes three main aspects of such an ethics. First, to think about political ethics means to consider "how ethics itself becomes political", that means, how ethics can no longer be seen as a set of principals, but that it has to be considered how ethical deliberations are situated in a political context and become themselves a matter of politics. Second, political ethics has to "act critically", that means, "it will have to interrogate its own categories continuously". Third, social justice must become the central perspective for political ethics (Thiem 2008, 231). Thiem also remarks two questions which the project of a political ethics has to face. On the one hand, it has to face the

"crucial problem that political theory has with moral philosophy, which is that moral philosophy has a tendency to depoliticize the issues it considers". On the other hand, one has to wonder: "What characterizes political ethics such that it might be considered a part of moral philosophy" (Thiem 2008, 231)?

I am not convinced if this project of a political ethics can face both of these two challenges, or if it is rather riven in the no-man's-land between the two disciplines. In a way, this is also my own tension – as a trained philosopher and political scientist. Hence, it is very difficult if not impossible for me to take sides in this discussion between political theory and moral philosophy. However, I think that for Butler's approach it is easier to satisfy the political theorist – at least the political theorist in me – than to convince the moral philosopher. In other words, I think that it is easier to interpret Butler as being on the side of the political theorist than on the side of the moral philosopher, and this is the reason why the present inquiry suggests that it is most productive to read her work in the field of political theory.

To sum up this matter in more general terms, one can say that this chapter <u>focused</u> on the problem of an ethical foundation of Butler's work. This question appeared in connection with a shift in Butler's work that has taken place in her more recent writings. After this shift certain ethical commitments in Butler's theory have become more apparent. While the discussion of this problem might have lead away from matters of political theory, it turns out that the result is actually an argument in support of the approach to read Butler as a political theorist. In that way, this chapter provides an important argument for the approach of the present inquiry.

Two main aspects can be highlighted that make it worth reading Butler in the discipline of political theory rather than in the discipline of moral philosophy. First, her permanent focus on relations of power and domination and the way in which she intriguingly connects this focus with the question of the status of the norms and especially the concern about the violence enforced by the norms makes the critical analysis of power relations, enhanced by an emphases on dimensions of normative violence, the starting point of Butler's theory. Second, Butler's refusal to ground politics in any non-contestable foundation – any time such a foundation is claimed, the power relations at work in making this claim have to be analyzed – reveals that the foundations of politics are political themselves, and leads to an insistence on the irreducible contextuality of all political struggles.

Butler's work functions on two levels. First, it can be a strong contribution on the level of political theory. Butler's account of the political subject discussed in part two of this

inquiry, and the notion of performativity and iterability presented in the current part are, in my opinion, her most important contributions in this respect. But, second, Butler's work also contains a political project. Especially the strategy of denaturalization is not only a matter of theory, but also a practical political intervention. In this context, I suggest reading Butler's ethical commitment as a political project that has to be contextualized in her struggle against the current norms rather than as an argument in moral philosophy. Both levels of Butler's work need closer examination in the light of the questions of Butler's contribution to politics and political theory, which will be the topic of the following, final part of this inquiry.

Part 4: Towards a Conclusion: Agency and Politics

The connection of the notion of performativity with the critical analyses of the political subject will be the main issue of chapter ten. In a way, this matter has already been investigated in the discussion of the paradoxical conflation of power and the subject in the process of subjection. In this chapter, however, it can receive further explication against the background of an elaborated account of Butler's notion of performativity. In this context, it can be shown that Butler's notion of performativity and her account of the political subject lead to a strong theory of political agency. Butler's approach to a theory of political agency has to be seen in the context of a tight link of subject and power, which is a crucial aspect of Butler's political theory. The second subsection of chapter ten offers an outlook on Butler's more recent writings, in which she seems to support a stronger notion of the self than she did previously.

Finally, chapter eleven investigates the concept of politics that emerges from Butler's notion of performativity and her account of political agency. This notion of politics is, first, not based on any fixed foundations, as the project of denaturalization leads to the permanent possibility of resignification of all political categories. Second, any democratic politics requires a radical openness of all categories for resignification and the commitment to the futurity of politics implied by it. Third, this implies an undeniable contingency and contextuality of any political project. In this context, Butler's own political struggle with the norms can also be contextualized.

In many instances, the discussion in this part will go beyond the scope of Butler's writings in an attempt to reformulate her approach as a political theory. I want to insist, however, that this reformulation is never meant to be against Butler, it is certainly not a rejection of

Butler's theory, but the effort to evolve it in the direction of political theory. Even though it is questionable if Butler would approve of all the modifications made in the present inquiry, this is not a matter of concern, since the validity of the claims presented here is not dependent on Butler's approval. If this contribution to political theory is supposed to be convincing, then it has to be so by itself. In this light, this inquiry has already taken a step beyond a mere interpretation of Butler's work.

10. Agency Reconsidered

One of the main objections against Butler's theory was that she does not offer a sufficient conception of the political subject or, more specifically, that her account of agency is too weak. As a consequence, readers were worried that she could not adequately explain political action and, more specific, the possibility of alteration and resistance, which in consequence makes any notion of social change implausible. This is basically a summary of the main theme of the reception of Butler in the 1990s.

With some distance, one might be surprised about the style and intensity of the early reception of Butler. As Thiem expresses it

> For those with a bit of distance from these discussions, this concern and the great investment of time and effort spent in articulating, debating, and refuting this concern that a theoretical argument does not permit for thinking agency might seem bewildering. The level of the concern voiced seems to imply that one expects this argument would cause a paralysis in the world in general by philosophically denying the possibility of agency (Thiem 2008,73).

The level of concern seems to indicate that people attribute an implausibly high degree of power to a philosophical argument. The replies that Butler received – at times very offensive and hostile – seem to stand in no relation to the actual influence that a theory such as Butler's can eventually have. Hence, what seems to be indicated is a more sober dealing with Butler's theory, treating it as what at is, a contribution to an ongoing academic debate.

While this argument certainly has some validity, Thiem is aware that this is not the only way to look at it. One should not forget that the conception of agency, indeed, plays a very significant role, because it has important consequences for the way "we think about responsibility, ethical and political values, and social change" (Thiem 2008, 73f.). How we think about agency is, for instance, crucial for the way our political and legal systems are built. Hence, the sharp reactions to Butler's theory can actually be seen as a sign that political theory does, indeed, matter. More importantly, it shows that our thinking about subjectivity is highly significant for our understanding of politics. Butler's challenge of

traditional conceptions of agency – if convincing – has significant consequences for the way we think about the organization of our social and political life and its institutional settings – and this can lead to a demand for social and political change.

Thus, it is worth taking a closer look at Butler's conception of agency that follows from her critical encounter with processes of subjection. The main question is: Does Butler's account of agency actually carry the terrible and frightening consequences that some of her critics were so concerned about? My claim is that this is certainly not the case. To support this claim and to reply to the critics, this chapter will present Butler's contribution to an account of political agency, a contribution that stands for a much stronger agency than most critics have seen and admitted.

With reference to Butler's writings of the 1990s, Thiem writes that Butler's account of agency seems to be twofold in:

> First, her starting point has been […] that one cannot understand agency outside of relations of power and the formative effects of social norms. Second, she has repeatedly attempted to formulate how undoing a voluntaristic conception of the subject and agency does not entail the abolition of agency. Her accounts aim to demonstrate precisely why a theory of subject formation by norms does not mean that the emergent subjects are predetermined by these norms (Thiem 2008, 86).

However, Thiem goes on to argue that such a focus on the formative dimension of dominant norms is quite problematic, because it tends to "consider agency only through the paradigm of resistance and the subversion of dominant norms and institutions" (Thiem 2008, 86). The idea is that an account of agency needs to consider the whole spectrum of agency, not only forms of agency that are subversive and/or in resistance to the norms. It has been shown in chapter eight that Butler's theory of performativity and iterability intend to develop such a broader notion of agency that cannot be reduced to the question of subversiveness. Even though one has to admit that Thiem puts forward a sound argument when she writes that Butler's publications of the 1990s at least imply a close tie between performativity/iterability and subversiveness/resistance by virtue of the contexts and examples that Butler has consulted for developing her account (Thiem 2008, 87), I have to disagree with her to the degree that I think that this is not the only way of reading Butler's work. Thus, the claim that Butler's notion of performativity can function as a political theory that offers a strong notion of agency and a convincing explanation for the relative stability of social and political institutions as well as for the possibility of social and political change will be reiterated in this chapter.

An additional dimension is that Butler has seemingly developed a slightly modified notion of agency in her more recent writings, especially in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Thiem

supports this shift, when she writes that "Butler has turned explicitly to theorize modes of self-transformation and the role of relations to others while continuing to argue that none of these relations are formed beyond the realm of social norms and relations of power" (Thiem 2008, 87f.). As a consequence, this chapter is divided into two subsections. The first subsection will offer a summary of the account of the political subject and its agency that can be drawn from Butler's account of subjection and her notion of performativity. The second subsection will continue with an interrogation of Butler's more recent writings, trying to highlight the continuities but also investigating the differences and shifts with the account in her earlier writings. The notion of self-formation and the practice of critique will play a crucial role here.

Resignifying the Subject

Butler regularly uses the term subject. This is a very old term with a long-standing and complex tradition in the history of Western thought, and, in a way, it seems neither fashionable nor useful to use this term nowadays. Butler herself refers to the history of the term at one point, pointing out that when "the term 'subject' appears to be too bound up with presumptions of sovereignty and epistemological transparency, arguments are made that such a term can no longer be used" (ES 144f.). We can see this move most famously in the case of Martin Heidegger, who – because of all the metaphysical implications the term invokes – strictly avoids to use the term 'subject' and refers to the kind of being which the human is as "*Dasein*" instead (Heidegger 2001, 11f.). But this Heideggerian avoidance of the term is clearly not the move Butler suggests, she, instead, recommends a resignification of the very term 'subject'. She writes that "it seems that the reuse of such a term in, say, a post-sovereign context, rattles the otherwise firm sense of context that such a term invokes" (ES 145). We can see a similar move to the one that lead to the resignification of the term 'queer' – an originally negative term that was reclaimed as a self description by gay, lesbian, intersex, transgender, etc. people – here, even though on a more theoretical level. In Butler's view, it is not the best strategy to avoid the term 'subject' because of its complex history, instead, she suggests that we should start reusing it in a way that might contradict its most notable tradition. Butler's strategy is to inscribe herself into the history of the term, to reappropriate it in order to open it up for a continuous rewriting in contemporary political thought. As we have seen in chapter four, Butler tries to show that there are at least two notions of the term subject, which already implies that the metaphysical notion of subject is not the only available one, but that there is also a political tradition of the term

in which the subject was theorized as empowered and subjected at the same time (SUB 1302f.). A reinvocation of this second tradition already serves the purposes of a reiteration and resignification that breaks up the restrictions of the predominant tradition in order to open up the term for reuse. In this way, we can say that Butler's texts are a performative statement that functions to make the use of the term subject possible again by means of its subversive reiteration.

In Butler's writings of the 1990s, we can see two main tendencies of this resignification of the term subject. First, Butler insists continuously that an exploration of subject formation does not cause the end of the subject's agency, but should rather be seen as an investigation into the conditions of its possibility. Second, such an exploration shows the tight link between the subject and politics.

In order to comprehend the consequences of these tendencies, I want to consider a statement from *Giving an Account of Oneself* where Butler states that, indeed, a death of the subject might be caused by the resignification she intends,"but this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had" (GA 65). It is not Butler's aim to get rid of the subject altogether, but to let go a certain notion of the subject, a notion that implies untenable metaphysical assumptions that we can no longer support – if we ever could. As a consequence, the subject does not disappear in Butler's analysis, it rather reappears even more prominent, but this time not as an epistemological, but as a political category. The task of denaturalization does not cause the abolition of the subject, instead, it shows that the subject is not a naturally given fact, but has to be considered as politically constituted all the way trough. But even this statement does not go far enough, because we also have to think of the relation of subject and politics as in itself political. The political link of subject and politics calls for a new thinking of the interplay of agency, power and domination as well as considerations about new forms of political strategy (Loyd 2005, 2).

I want to go back to *Gender Trouble* at this point in order to investigate this link of subject and politics in Butler's first and maybe most famous formulation. With reference to Nietzsche's claim that "there is no 'being' behind doing", Butler draws her famous conclusion for the status of gender: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (GT 34). This leads to the main claim of *Gender Trouble* that gender is not natural and predetermined, but constituted by its very performativity. But it is also important to note

that this does not mean that gender is something free-floating and open to voluntary performances. Rather, Butler is very clear that gender is something that has been performatively fixed and stabilized by the "regulatory practices of gender coherence" (GT 34). To repeat it once again, performativity does not mean voluntary performances. "In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (GT 34). Instead, performativity means the process in which the identity of the subject is time and again constituted in relation to and in struggle with the established gender norms. In this process, the subject is not the foundation, but precisely the site where performativity takes place. Even though these formulations might sound odd if thought as an account of agency, Butler is very clear that this is what they are supposed to be. In the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble* she states:

> In this text as elsewhere I have tried to understand what political agency might be, given that it cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power from which it is wrought. The iterability of performativity is a theory of agency, one that cannot disavow power as the condition of its own possibility (GT xxv).

Lloyd summarizes the consequences for the notion of the subject that follow from a theory of performativity very coherently when she writes that

> the subject that Butler is discussing is very much a subject-in-process. It is never actually completed. Rather, the subject is in a state of perpetual constitution; subjected time and again. It is in this condition because of the nature of re-iteration. Second, and significantly, the performative subject is not the autonomous author of their constitutive performance; instead intentionality (or autonomy) is bounded by the iterability of the elements making up the performance (Lloyd 2005, 98).

Precisely in this context, "the question of 'the subject' is crucial for politics" (GT 3), because if the subject is not pregiven and static but performatively constituted time and again, we have to become involved in the difficult task of a genealogy of subject positions that takes into account the various forms of subject formation that are available in the framework of the current norms. In this context, the link of subject and norms is always political in a double sense. First, the norms and the subject positions which are enabled by the norms are already political to begin with, even though their political nature is traditionally hidden through processes of naturalization. Therefore, denaturalization and critical genealogy are necessary tasks to reveal the performative nature of these supposedly natural 'facts'. Second, these tasks are again political practices that make a critical, political attitude towards the norms possible that nevertheless enabled the subject and its critique in first place.

In this context I want to suggest once again to return to Butler's essay "Contingent Foundations", because even though this essay was only a minor contribution to an ongoing debate

at the time of the publication of *Gender Trouble*, it is in my eyes the probably clearest and easiest accessible text Butler has ever written. In the following, I simply want to follow the argumentation of only a few pages of this essay, because they anticipate basically everything that Butler was writing subsequently in the 1990s and summarize the major aspects of the account of the subject established in these writings more coherently than anybody else ever could. Butler begins with citing the main assumption of traditional accounts of political agency and her basic reply to it:

> We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safe-guard the *agency* of the subject. But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency (CF 46).

In a way, this is also a restatement of the main claim that what Butler puts forward is, indeed, a theory of the political subject and its agency.

> My suggestion is that agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field. But if we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible, then agency can be *presumed* only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its construction (CF 46).

In other words, it is the veiling process of naturalization that sets up the subject and its agency as pregiven and independent of political contexts of constitution. "In a sense, the epistemological model that offers us a pregiven subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that *agency is always and only a political prerogative*" (CF 46f.). Therefore, this epistemological model of the subject is not only naturalizing, but at the same time also depoliticizing. In this context, "it seems crucial to question the conditions of its possibility, not to take it for granted as an a priori guarantee" (CF 47) in order to respond to this deviation from politics.

In this sense, denaturalization is a movement of repoliticization. The main claim is that agency is not an epistemological capacity, but a possibility under certain political conditions. The main question is: "What are the concrete conditions under which agency becomes possible, a very different question than the metaphysical one, what is the self such that its agency can be theoretically secured prior to any reference to power" (CR 136f.)? In the traditional view, which we are no longer able to support if we accept Butler's project of denaturalization, "agency is an attribute of persons, presupposed as prior to power and language, inferred from the structure of the self" (CR 137). Butler, in contrast, wants to defend the view that "agency is the effect of discursive conditions which do not for that reason control its use; it is not a transcendental category, but a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting relations" (CR 137).

Such a notion of agency that takes into account its social conditions of possibility can also be found in Butler's later writings, in fact, it remains a crucial element of her theory that she has never departed from. In *Undoing Gender* she writes: "My agency does not consist in denying this condition of my constitution. If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility" (UG 3). Butler goes on to specify this insight with reference to more concrete, political circumstances:

> Indeed, individuals rely on institutions of social support in order to exercise self-determination with respect to what body and what gender to have and maintain, so that self-determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency. Conversely (and as a consequence), it turns out that changing the institutions by which humanly viable choice is established and maintained is a prerequisite for the exercise of self-determination. In this sense, individual agency is bound up with social critique and social transformation (UG 7).

In this passage it becomes clear that Butler's account of agency is not only a theoretical impulse, but at the same time also a practical task. If agency is supposed to be possible, it needs to be made possible in a concrete social context. This requires an interrogation of this context in order to critically evaluate if it enables and enhances agency or rather suppresses it.

But we also have to note that it is not enough to engage into this critical inquiry of the social conditions only once, rather what is needed is a permanent struggle with these conditions that will not come to an end.

> For if the subject is constituted by power, that power does not cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again. That subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked (CF 47).

The crucial aspect is again that this process of subject formation "is as such fully political; indeed, perhaps *most* political at the point in which it is claimed to be prior to politics itself" (CF 47). The strategies of denaturalization and genealogy do not have the purpose of doing "away with the subject or pronounce its death, but merely to claim that certain versions of the subject are politically insidious" (CF 47). This has to be seen in connection with the depoliticizing effects of naturalization:

> For the subject to be a pregiven point of departure for politics is to defer the question of the political construction and regulation of the subject itself; for it is important to remember that subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view (CF 47).

At this point, Butler also binds together the investigation of processes of subject formation with the importance to draw attention to the processes of exclusion that it involves, and she highlights in this context that these exclusions produce spheres of the constitutive outside – a complex and vague term, as we have seen – which haunts the constituted subjects as well as the constituting norms.

The general aim of Butler's account of the political subject can be described as "an effort to resignify the subject as a site of resignification", which forces us to "rework that notion outside the terms of an epistemological given" (CF 48). Butler admits that there is talk about the death of the subject, but she suggests that it is very clear to her that "the death of that subject is not the end of agency, of speech, or of political debate" (CF 48). Butler continues with a reference to the criticism of Benhabib, who claims that Butler's account makes agency principally impossible and that this is especially problematic in the context of a strong feminist movement that enables women for the first time to occupy equal subject positions. In this context, Butler clarifies her position once again:

> To take the construction of the subject as a political problematic is not the same as doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept; on the contrary, deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that to which the term, 'the subject,' refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority (CF 48f.).

In other words, a deconstruction of the subject has the consequence that it enables us to reappropriate the term as a critical category in the context of a genealogy of political authority. Thus, the aim is a resignification of the political subject as a critical category of political theory in order to investigate into the social conditions of possibility of agency in a concrete social context.

This is the main impulse of Butler's account of the political subject and its agency, which has significant consequences for our understanding of the relation of subject and politics and of the task of political theory. To sum it up, the subject is not prior to politics, but a major investment in the political process itself. Accordingly, agency is not a transcendental capacity, but a fragile possibility that has to be achieved and secured in political contexts. Political theory has to get involved in a genealogy of naturalization processes – which are an effect of hegemonic practices – in order to achieve a repoliticization of the subject through strategies of denaturalization.

Self-formation and Critique

The remainder of this chapter will look into a few passages of Butler's more recent writ-

ings. The task is to detect similarities and shifts in her theory. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler investigates into a shift in Foucault's account of the subject. This investigation is of significance, because it seems to correspond with Butler's own shift concerning that matter. Butler summarizes Foucault's shift in the following way:

> Whereas in his earlier work, he treats the subject as an 'effect' of discourse, in his later writings he nuances and refines his position as follows: The subject forms itself in relation to a set of codes, prescriptions, or norms and does so in ways that not only (a) reveal self-constitution to be a kind of *poiesis* but (b) establish self-making as part of the broader operation of critique (GA 17).

Actually, this shift enables Butler to formulate a critique of her own theory of subjection given in *The Psychic life of Power* – and I suppose it is justified to say that she has supported this theory in all her writings from the 1990s – namely, that she was too quick to accept the notion of the formation of the subject through the subjection under the norm by virtue of an interpellation[78] (GA 15). In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler points out that this subjection has to be seen in connection with a self-constitution of the subject. However, the main insight still remains the same as in her earlier writings, namely that "this work on the self, this act of delimiting, takes place within the context of a set of norms that precede and exceed the subject" (GA 17). In other words, "there is no making of oneself (*poiesis*) outside of a mode of subjectivation (*assujetissement*) and, hence, no self-making outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible forms that a subject may take" (GA 17). Nevertheless, we can also see a significant shift at least in focus, when Butler no longer speaks of a process of subjection, but of an act of "self-crafting, which always takes place in relation to an imposed set of norms" (GA 19).

In this inquiry, I want to focus on the consequences that this shift has for an account of agency. Butler concludes with reference to the act of self-crafting:

> If there is an operation of agency or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. This ethical agency, is neither fully determined nor radically free. […] This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one's life, a struggle – an agency – is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary conditions of unfreedom (GA 19).

In her essay on "What is critique", Butler also deals with this complex interplay of self-formation and formation by the norms, in other words, of the subject as being formed and forming. Butler suggests that the moment in which being formed by the norms turns into the subject's self-formation is the very moment of the subject's reflexivity. In this complex reflexivity, it will be very difficult – if not impossible – to distinguish the forming from the

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78 The notion of interpellation is taken from Louis Althusser and has some influence on Butler's account of subjection. In the present inquiry, however, subjection is discussed without reference to interpellation or Althusser.

being formed (WC 225). For, again, "there is no self-forming outside of a mode of subjectivation, which is to say, there is no self-forming outside of the norms that orchestrate the possible formation of the subject" (WC 226).

It is worth noting that in this essay Butler is also exceptionally keen about the shift in her own account, when she writes in the concluding paragraph: "We have moved quietly from the discursive notion of the subject to a more psychologically resonant notion of 'self', and it may be that for Foucault the later term carries more agency than the former" (WC 226). Indeed, it may even be that Butler agrees with this opinion and that she implicitly wants to suggest that her own account of agency, which she put forward in the 1990s, was, perhaps, too weak. It is very hard to determine what Butler's opinion concerning this matter eventually is, because there is simply not enough evidence in her texts.

An interview, which Butler gave in 2008, might give a few hints about the shift in her account. In this interview, Butler actually gives the 'I' a much stronger role than she has on previous occasions. Even though she keeps on insisting that the 'I' can only exist insofar as it has been constituted by the norms, insofar as it has been credited with intelligibility by the established categories, Butler also grants it with the ability to say 'no' or to ask 'why?'. According to this interview, the moment when the formation of the subject turns into a self-formation is precisely the moment when the 'I' turns against the norms and starts questioning them. And she continues that this turn against the norms is the practice of critique. Critique can never be made from the outside, because we cannot escape the domain of the norms. The norms in question are the ones that form the very conditions of one's existence. Hence, it is not without risk for the subject to perform critique, because questioning the norms that function as the basis for our existence means questioning our own status as subjects. In other words, we put our own intelligibility at stake when conducting critique of the norms that regulate the domain of intelligibility (Birulés 2008). In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler confirms that struggling with one's status as a subject always means struggling with the norms that made this subject position possible, and, as a consequence if the subject wants to investigate "the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist" (GA 8).

But the question is, where does this ability for critique, this ability to break with the norms, come from? Butler is at least very close here to a reintroduction of an account of the self that grants it with certain intrinsic features – the ability to say 'no' and to ask 'why', for instance. That must not *per se* be bad, but it raises the question how these ontological assumptions can be matched with Butler's insistence on the project of denaturalization, or

if they mark a departure from it.

It has already been made clear that I tend to think that Butler's ontological commitments in her more recent writings cause more problems than they solve. It has also been noted that the particular concern is that these commitments effect a weakening of Butler's critical political project and a certain departure from politics. Hence, the suggestion of the present inquiry is that the account of agency, which has been presented in the first subsection of this chapter, is not only better suited for the reception of Butler in the discipline of political theory, but it is actually also much more convincing. The connection of subject and politics – the reformulation of the subject as a critical political category – is an particularly intriguing prospect that needs to be developed further.

11. New Modes of Politics

In this final chapter, I want to begin with the distinction between two main camps in the reception of Butler's political thought. According to first camp, which was generally prevalent in the early reception of Butler's thought, Butler has a very limited notion of politics that is not very useful for political analysis or political action Usually, critical readers that belong to this camp point to the narrow focus on language in Butler's work and conclude that Butler's notion of politics is restricted to linguistic practices of resignification. Distelhorst, for instance, argues that Butler's project of deconstruction is without prospects and offers no political strategy whatsoever. He claims that it turns out that Butler's analysis is in fact unpolitical, because its intervention into a linguistic discourse offers no prospects to change the discourse in a strategic way (Distelhorst 2007, 15f.). Bublitz enforces this criticism when she speaks of Butler's politics as a "semiotic guerilla war" ["semiotischer Guerillakrieg"] (Bublitz 2002, 118), which – as she expresses in line with Distelhorst – offers no sufficient political options and strategies. This interpretation is based on the agreement that it is verified that Butler's political project can be sufficiently characterized as the resignification of discourse (Distelhorst 2007, 161f.). Indeed, if we agree with this restricted characterization of Butler's project, it seems justified to conclude that such a project – that only focuses on practices of resignification and, maybe, similar practices like parody and drag – is too narrow to provide a comprehensive theory of political action.

But, luckily, we do not need to agree that it is verified that Butler's project can be reduced in this way. Against this restriction, we have to consider the fact that it has already been shown that Butler's theory of performativity at least intends to give an account of political

agency and social change that goes further than the notion of resistance and subversiveness. In addition to that, I want to argue in this chapter that it is in fact a misreading of Butler's account to think that she argues that resignification is the only possible political strategy. On the contrary, we have to consider that Butler's opinion about political strategy and action is much more complex than that.

Supporters of the second camp differ from the first in two distinct ways. First, some of them argue that the strategy of resignification is actually a richer political project than Butler's critics want to believe (Salih 2002). Second, others point out that Butler's theory of politics consists of more elements than the strategy of resignification and that it needs to be seen in its whole complexity. Chambers and Carver, for example, suggest that "we can think of Butler's work as 'troubling politics', in that it refuses the static conception of politics". For Butler, politics is neither "the production of consensus" nor the "mere administration of affairs […]. She insists on a politics of struggle, strife, conflict – a radical democratic politics that is disturbing in that it literally *disturbs* by interrupting the given order" (Chambers/Carver 2008, 9). Lloyd is maybe even clearer about the consequences of a Butlerian view on politics, when she writes that if the question is 'What is politics?' then the question has to be refused in case an answer in the form of a definition is expected (Lloyd 2005, 6). For Butler's project indicates "that the political sphere is not fixed. It changes as dissonant or alternative forms of politics irrupt into it" (Lloyd 2005, 3). In short, the question what politics is, is a political question and requires a political answer (Lloyd 2005, 6).

The argument presented here is certainly in favor of the second camp. I am convinced that Butler's theory – even though she does not often speak explicitly about politics in her writings – can be a significant contribution to a political theory. In addition to the arguments of the second camp, two further aspects of Butler's notion of politics can be highlighted. First, we have to note Butler's insistence on a radical openness as the main characteristic of all kinds of politics that can be described as democratic; in this context, we can also see how Butler's notion of politics is linked to a notion of radical democracy as employed by Laclau and Mouffe. Second, we need to focus on Butler's emphasis on the contingency and contextuality of all political strategies and actions. But before the argumentation returns to these matters, Butler's understanding of resignification will be discussed in order to show that it can be generalized in a way that allows to appreciate it as an account of political change.

Politics of Resignifiability

The notion of politics which Butler presents in her writings of the 1990s and especially in *Gender Trouble*, can be characterized as a politics of resignifiability. Resignifiability is the term I want to suggest as the name for an understanding of politics that is based on the denaturalization of identity categories, which implies that all such categories are irreducibly open for the possibility of resignification. Drawing from the conflation of linguistic and political representation in the introduction of *Gender Trouble* (GT 2), and the notion of discourse developed by Laclau and Mouffe, it is important to note that resignifiability cannot be reduced to linguistic resignification, but effects all articulations – in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe's use of the term – of political categories.

I want to begin the discussion of Butler's understanding of the possibility of resignification with an examination of the conclusion of *Gender Trouble*, which has the misleading title "From Parody to Politics". The title is misleading insofar as it might suggest that parody is already a mode of politics or that politics should be organized after the model of parody. This might actually one of the main reasons why many readers got such a restricted view of Butler's politics. However, I do not think that Butler wants to suggest that parody is a mode of politics or that political action should become like parody. Actually, the title indicates a movement away from parody and towards politics.

At the beginning of the conclusion, Butler reminds the reader that the opening question of *Gender Trouble* was "whether feminist politics could do without a 'subject' in the category of women" (GT 194). The conclusion which Butler wants to draw in *Gender Trouble* is that "the feminist 'we' is always and only a phantasmatic construction" (GT 194) and that a deconstruction of the category 'women' – as well as all identity categories in general – is required. This, however, does not mean that it is impossible to refer to specific subject positions in the context of concrete political struggles. On the contrary, it might turn out to be a political necessity:

> Within feminism, it seems as if there is some political necessity to speak as and for *women*, and I would not contest that necessity. Surely, that is the way in which representational politics operates, and in this country, lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics. So we agree that demonstrations and legislative efforts and radical movements need to make claims in the name of women (CF 49).

But we have to be aware that this necessary representation within politics is only one side of the story, and, as Butler insists, we are never allowed to forget the other side: "The minute that the category of women is invoked as *describing* the constituency for which feminism speaks, an internal debate invariable begins over what the descriptive content of

that term will be" (CF 49). Even though it might turn out to be necessary to speak in the name of a certain group of people, in other words, to represent them at the political stage, we are not allowed to forget that this representation is not a simple description, but rather a performative constitution of the very group it supposes to represent.[79] Butler clarifies this complex situation the following way:

> Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary. This is not to say that the term 'women' ought not to be used, or that we ought to announce the death of the category. On the contrary, if 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. I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and then give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear" (CF 50).

For Butler, the denaturalization of identity categories is the condition of possibility for the resignifiability of these categories, which opens up the possibilities for a political struggle over the content of these categories.

This has significant consequences for politics: "The radical instability of the category sets into question the *foundational* restrictions on feminist political theorizing and opens up other configurations, not only of gender and bodies, but of politics itself" (GT 194). This destabilization of foundations is the prerequisite for a radical process of democratization. Keeping the basic categories open for resignification is not the end of politics, but the condition for its democratic future (CF 51). In *Gender Trouble* Butler writes about this connection of identity categories and politics: "The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (GT 203). This statement is very important, but also slightly misleading, because it explains how denaturalization can function as a starting point for political engagement. The project of denaturalization wants to reveal the ungrounded

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79 Butler repeats this argumentation several times in her work, for instance in *Bodies that Matter*, where she writes: "To understand 'women' as a permanent site of context, or as a feminist site of agonistic struggle, is to presume that there can be no closure on the category and that, for politically significant reasons, there ought never to be. That the category can never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy. In this sense, what is lamented as disunity and factionalization from the perspective informed by the descriptivist ideal is *affirmed* by the anti-descriptivist perspective as the open and democratizing potential of the category" (BM 221). And one page further she clarifies once again that a "double movement" is required: on the one hand "to invoke the category and, hence, provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest. That term is questionable does not mean that we ought not to use it, but neither does the necessity to use it mean that we ought not perpetually to interrogate the exclusion by which it proceeds, and to do this precisely in order to learn how to live the contingency of the political signifier in a culture of democratic contestation" (BM 222).

nature of all identity categories. The corresponding genealogy of identity categories reveals the power relations that are at work in the stabilization and naturalization of such identities.[80]

Summarizing the main aim of *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that "this theoretical inquiry has attempted to locate the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identity" (GT 201). And she continues that "this effort, however, can only be accomplished through the introduction of a set of question that extend the very notion of the political" (GT 201). Hence, what is required are new modes of politics: "If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as s set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old" (GT 203). However, this outlook forms the end of *Gender Trouble* and Butler does not offer further guidance what such a new configuration of politics might look like.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler tries to fill this void with reference to a theory of radical democracy. In this context, Butler again refers to the work of Laclau and Mouffe, as she begins with a brief summary of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of radical democracy. For Laclau and Mouffe, the main point is that all political signifiers are related to each other in a contingent way. Hegemony is the name for the articulation of these relations of the political signifiers. Hegemony is itself ungrounded, but nevertheless steadily produces its own necessity as its effect. In other words, hegemony regulates the contingent political signifiers and effects the appearance of their necessity. Antagonism, on the other hand, is the name of the ungrounded nature of the permanent processes of articulation, the perpetual rearticulation of political signifiers in relation to each other (Laclau/Mouffe 2001, 105ff. and BM 192f.).

The fact that every discursive formation is subjected to a permanent rearticulation of political signifiers "constitutes the temporal order of democracy as an incalculable future, leaving open the production of new subject-positions, new political signifiers, and new linkages to become the rallying points for politicization" (BM 193), an aspect that is partic-

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80 In a way, we can say that Butler works on a resignification of the very notion of identity, which previously functioned as the foundation for political action through stabilizing the political subject, and now designates what is at stake in an ungrounded political struggle. Thus, the term identity – resignified by its denaturalization – reemerges as a basic category of politics. Sarah Salih's introduction puts a lot of emphasis on this political character of identity. But, in my opinion, her interpretation goes too far when Salih concludes that "construction and deconstruction […] are the necessary – in fact the *only* – scenes of agency" (Salih 2002, 67f.), because this reinforces a limited view on Butler's account of agency. In general, I think that Salih's book is still the best available introduction to Butler's work. It is specially remarkable that she starts with a discussion of Butler's dissertation *Subjects of Desire*, designating the whole first chapter of the introduction to this early work.

ularly important for Butler. In a footnote, she writes that "this non-theologically constrained notion of futurity opened up by the necessary incompleteness of any discursive formation within the political field links the project of radical democracy to Derrida's work" (BM 278(5)). Derrida was especially keen on this futurity of politics, an uncloseable openness of all categories for its future resignification, that is constituted by their iterability. Butler leaves no doubt that she believes that Laclau and Mouffe do not go far enough at this point and that their theory of radical democracy needs to be radicalized by a stronger notion of incalculable futurity. Butler clarifies this insight once again with reference to the category 'women':

> The 'subject-position' of women, for instance, is never fixed by the signifier 'women'; that term does not describe a preexisting constituency, but is, rather, part of the very production and formulation of that constituency, one that is perpetually renegotiated and rearticulated in relation to other signifiers within the political field. This instability in all discursive fixing is the promise of a teleologically unconstrained futurity for the political signifier. In this sense, the failure of any ideological formation to establish itself as necessary is part of its democratic promise, the ungrounded 'ground' of the political signifier as a site of rearticulation (BM 195).

To sum up, what is required is a theory that accounts for the radical contingency as well as the incalculable futurity of all political categories. The term resignifiability is meant to designate this permanent openness of every category.

Thus, naming Butler's account a politics of resignifiability means to emphasize her commitment to this contingency and futurity. For Butler, it is crucial to account for this contingency and openness of politics that must involve even its most constitutive terms. Whenever this openness is closed or this contingency resolved with reference to a foundation, we are confronted with a strategy of depoliticization that has to be countered by an insistence on the political character of all categories and the permanent possibility of resignification.

This new configuration of politics is tightly linked with Butler's account of the political subject. Butler writes that "this converging and interarticulation *is* the contemporary fate of the subject" (BM 230). Butler draws the same conclusion for the political use of identity categories as in *Gender Trouble*, when she states that "it is in this sense that the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error" (BM 230). It is necessary to speak in the name of certain groups, in other words, to articulate certain identity categories in their name, but at the same time, every such attempt must necessary fail in order to avoid to once again perform a certain naturalization that immunizes itself against further contestation.

Butler explains the consequences of this insight with reference to the notion of 'queer'. On

the one hand, "the assertion of 'queer' will be necessary as a term of affiliation", but, on the other hand, we have to be aware that it

> will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments (BM 230).

The term 'queer' is specially designated in Butler's eyes for this openness for future resignifications, because the term has already been used as a label for those who were not represented but nevertheless seek representation. Hence, Butler suggests that the term 'queer' has the potential to become a discursive site that serves not only the "purpose of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also to expose, affirm, and rework the specific history of the term" (BM 230). But, in fact, this potential is not restricted to the term 'queer', in other words, this potential is not linked to this specific term. Every political category has the potential to become the site of this radical openness, hence, every category can become queer in the sense that it stands for this constitutive resignifiability of all categories. If we understand queer in this very broad sense, we can understand why queer politics is not at all only a politics of queer, but another possible name for this contingency and openness that constitutes all politics.

We have seen that Butler's notion of politics cannot be reduced to traditional liberal models of politics, which basically see politics as the system of bargaining among established – individual and collective – subjects with defined interests. Butler refuses any such model, because she rejects the premises that such a model presupposes, most importantly, the notion of established subjects with defined interests. For Butler, the constitution of those very subjects and their political identities and interest is the main political question and concern. She particularly focuses on the role of power in the constitution of political subjects and the influence of hegemonic norms that regulate the field of possible subject positions.

It is in this context that the notion of iterability can be reformulated as a politics of resignifiability. In order to do so, however, it is important to focus on the social and political conditions of resignification. Resignification always takes place under hegemonic conditions. The naturalization of categories leads to their immunization against further political contestation. Therefore, the project of denaturalization is required in order to repoliticize those supposedly natural categories. Denaturalization is a political intervention in the name of a radical politicization. In this context, resignifiability is not only the condition of

possibility of the contestation and resignification of political categories, but also something that requires a permanent struggle. It requires a struggle with the hegemonic norms that regulate the field of possible identities and subject positions; and a struggle against the permanent risks of naturalization and depoliticization. In short, what is required is a commitment to and an intervention for the constitutive openness of all politics.

Contingency and Contextuality

In order to conclude this chapter, we have to take into account that Butler herself points towards certain shortcomings of her account in *Gender Trouble* in subsequent writings. We have to consider how that effects the politics of resignifiability developed in the previous subsection.

In a footnote to the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, Butler thanks Jacqueline Rose for pointing out "the disjunction between the earlier and the later parts of this text", namely that the text seems to forget the "melancholic construction of gender" it investigates in the earlier chapters when it comes to its conclusion. Butler states that this perhaps "accounts for some of the 'mania' of the final chapters" (GT 206 (9)). In other words, the notion of politics presented in the conclusion of *Gender Trouble* is too simple and too optimistic, as it forgets about the dependency on the norms and the process of exclusion that haunts every political identity. Butler clarifies these matters in *The Psychic Life of Power* in the context of her elaborated theory of subjection: She writes that "social categories signify subordination and existence at once" (PLP 20). For a subject to gain an intelligible existence, it is necessary to embrace the social categories that are available in the domain of intelligible life. These categories exist prior to the making of the subject, and because no existence outside these categories is possible, "the vulnerability of the subject to a power not of its own making is unavoidable" (PLP 20). The subject cannot elude the power that regulates the categories of social existence: "Where social categories guarantee a recogniz-able and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all" (PLP 20). Thus, we can almost speak of a desire to be subjected under the norms, a desire that is synonym with the desire to life (PLP 28). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler focusses on psychical dimensions of subjection precisely because "to the extent that norms operate as psychic phenomena, restricting and producing desire, they also govern the formation of the subject and circumscribe the domain of a livable sociality" (PLP 21). This regulation of desire that produces and represses it at the same time, causes a melancholia in the process of subject

formation. In every subject formation a loss takes place for which no account can be given (PLP 23f.). This forms the psychic limit for all resignifiability, which is not as open and unlimited as the conclusion of *Gender Trouble* may have indicated.

The other limit that a politics of resignifiability has to be aware of is that Butler herself clearly indicates at several occasions that resignification cannot be the only political strategy. In the discussion with Laclau and Žižek, Butler states that "it is no doubt right to claim that resignification cannot be the only political strategy" and she adds: "Luckily, I do not believe that I ever claimed that" (DC 277). Indeed, already the final sentence of *Gender Trouble* pointed in this direction: "What other local strategies for engaging the 'unnatural' might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?" (GT 203) This conclusion already indicates that a plurality of strategies is useful and required to follow a project of denaturalization.

But more importantly, Butler is convinced that theory can neither substitute concrete political action and engagement nor prescribe its concrete shape and content. In an interview in 1999, Butler said that she thinks "that political decisions are made in that lived moment and they can't be predicted from the level of theory" (Bell 1999, 167). Thus, political action and strategy is "contingent and contextual and [...] it cannot be predicted or prescribed but rather is dependent upon decisions taken at opportune political moments" (Lloyd 2005, 173) In this context we can come back to Nussbaum's criticism in "The Professor of Parody", in order to understand how important it is for the reception of Butler to emphasis her insistence on the complexity and contextuality of political action. For Nussbaum, Butler is the most famous – and therefore also most dangerous example – of new "feminist thinkers" who "believe that the way to do feminist politics is to use words in a subversive way, in academic publications of lofty obscurity and disdainful abstractness" (Nussbaum 1999, 2), because they suffer from a "fatal blindness" about the actual suffering of "women who are hungry, illiterate, disenfranchised, beaten, raped" (Nussbaum 1999, 11) and a dramatic "loss of a sense of public commitment" (Nussbaum 1999, 13). I am not aware of any direct reply to these accusations, but Butler seems to address Nussbaum implicitly, when she writes in *Precarious Life*:

> We could have several engaged intellectual debates going on at the same time and find ourselves joined in the fight against violence, without having to agree on many epistemological issues. We could disagree on the status and character of modernity and yet find ourselves joined in asserting and defending the rights of indigenous women to health care, reproductive technology, decent wages, physical protection, cultural rights, freedom of assembly (PL 48).

For Butler, intellectual disagreement does not rule out the possibility of having shared

political opinions and committing to joined political actions. For Butler it is even essential to leave room for these intellectual debates, because otherwise every political commitment comes at the risk of being forced to comply with a certain academic position or a certain identity once again. Political commitment should neither presuppose that one belongs to a specific intellectual camp, nor should it require that one has a fixed identity.

It is crucial for Butler to insist on the fact that an account of the ungroundedness and contingency of politics does not mean that political action becomes implausible. One can easily imagine Butler directly addressing Nussbaum at this point: "If you saw me on such a protest line, would you wonder how a postmodernist was able to muster the necessary 'agency' to get there today? I doubt it. You would assume that I had walked or taken the subway" (PL 48). And she can continue speaking in more general terms: "By the same token, various routes lead us into politics, various stories bring us onto the street, various kinds of reasoning and belief. We do not need to ground ourselves in a single model of communication, a single model of reason, a single notion of the subject before we are able to act" (PL 48). Intellectual agreement is not required as the foundation of political action. Accordingly, intellectual disagreement – even if it goes down to the grounds of our under-standing of politics – does not lead to the impossibility of joined political action. We cannot theoretically prescribe why people should become involved in politics and in what ways. This is not a disadvantage or weakness, but a consequence of the contingency of politics and the impossibility to ground it on a secured knowledge.

It seems that the consistent factor that leads Butler into politics is the struggle with the norms that define what counts as an intelligible life. For Butler, this struggle is the ultimate political task. In the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, she refers to this moment when one realizes that the borders between the real and the unreal, the possible and the impossible do no longer stay in their supposedly natural place, because they can no longer be secured by a knowledge about given facts. "Although this insight does not in itself constitute a polit-ical revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one's notion of the possible and the real. And sometimes this shift comes as a result of certain kinds of practices that precede their explicit theorization, and which prompt a rethinking of our basic categories" (GT xxiv). In *Undoing* Gender, Butler specifies that what is required from us is that we "ask, as we asked about gender violence, what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability [sic] And what are our politics such that we are, in whatever way is possible, both conceptualizing the possibility of the livable life and arranging for its institutional support" (UG 39)?

Butler assures us that there will never be agreement about the answers to these questions, but she is convinced that "this is only because to live is to live a life politically" which implies to live "in relation to power, in relation to others, in the act of assuming responsibility for a collective future" (UG 39). At this point, Butler insists again on the openness of the futurity of politics, when she writes that "to assume responsibility for a future, however, is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness" (UG 39). The future that politics may take is unpredictable and must remain open to permanent contestation. The questions: What is right? And: What is good? must remain undecided in advance, for they "consist in staying open to the tension that beset the most fundamental categories we require, in knowing unknowingness at the core of what we know, and what we need, and in recognizing the sign of life in what we undergo without certainty about what will come" (UG 39).

Summary

The present inquiry has tried to show that Butler's work can be read as an important and convincing contribution to political theory. First of all, Butler provides an elaborate account of the political subject and its agency. For Butler, the subject does not serve as a foundation, but as the result of a complex process of subjection, and, thus, she highlights the importance of an analysis of modes of subject formation and the subject position made possible. In this context, we have seen that the question of the constitution of the subject is tightly linked with the analysis of power and the functioning of the norm, and that it is in this respect an immanently political concern.

The subject, however, is not only the passive result of its subjection, but at the same time the very site of iterability, which signifies not only the possibility of a stabilization of established power relations, but also an alteration that might eventually lead to social change. In this way, iterability serves as an explanation of social and political change. Power is not a static entity, but a complex relation that is dependent on its reiteration by the subject in its subordination. Correspondingly, the agency of the subject lies in this necessary reiteration of the norms, which is not a mechanic repetition, but leaves room for alteration and – if one wants to use the term – freedom.

However, I have also pointed out that if we want to read Butler's theory in this way, a few new are required. Most notably, the central role of the norm for the notions of performativity and iterability needs to be highlighted. Iterability does not mean the voluntary and optional iteration of an arbitrary action, but a reiteration that takes place in the context of regulatory, hegemonic norms. In the same way, performativity does not signify a voluntary performance by a sovereign agent, but the necessary and forced constitution of the subject in and through permanent performances. To sum up, iterability and performativity can only be understood adequately when regarded in connection with the power of the norms.

We have seen that Butler puts special emphasis on the social limits of iterability, which at the same time form the social condition of possibility of agency. Given the ungrounded and contingent nature of political categories, the main question is: What is possible here and now under the given set of norms? This question requires an analysis of the power of the norms, in other words, of the normative force that defines the sphere of socially possible categories of political identity. Additionally we have to rethink this power of the norms in the light of a theory of hegemony, which makes it also possible to take the material as well

as the bodily dimensions of power into stronger consideration. Finally, we have to consider the violence that these norms enforce when defining the realm of the socially possible, banning a set of lives outside the realm of sociality.

This inquiry has also discussed certain shifts in Butler's account. In her writings of the 1990s, the project of denaturalization and the complementary genealogy of naturalization processes were predominant, which went hand in hand with a focus on discursive formations. In this context, the subject was established as a critical category of social theory and the task was a genealogy of the subject, with other words, the critical analysis of various processes of subject formation and the subject positions they enable. In Butler's more recent writings, however, her focus has shifted from the power of discourse to the functioning of the norms. Simultaneously, the question of the ethical foundation of the struggle with the norms has become urgent. The reading of this shift presented in this inquiry suggests that this new focus comes at the risk of a departure from politics. Accordingly, we can also observe a shift in Butler's conceptualization of the subject, which moved from a strictly critical notion of the subject as a position within a discursive formation to a more psychologically grounded notion of the self. This new notion of the self inevitably implies more ontological commitments from Butler's side, which is questionable considering Butler's critical attitude towards any ontology.

A consistent factor in Butler's whole work has been the definition of the main task, even though this definition has become more explicit in her recent writings. We can identify the critique of the hegemonic norm, the fight against all forms of normative violence and the struggle to make lives livable as the driving force behind Butler's work. I have suggested that this task should be seen as the final aim of Butler's political project rather than an ethical foundation in the traditional sense. The critical impetus of Butler's project is that all norms produce certain exclusions that restrict the possibilities to live and make the lives of those that do not fall under the norm virtually unlivable. To strive for this aim requires the denaturalization of established categories which appear to be natural but are in fact produced as natural by strategies of naturalization. In contrast to the naturalization of basic categories, Butler insists on the openness of all categories to resignification, the contingency and contextuality of all politics and the commitment to a democratic project that accounts for its incalculable futurity.

For an appreciation of Butler's in the discipline of political science, two adaptations seem

to be required. First, Butler's analysis needs to be historically and culturally contextualized. To be clear at this point, I think that the common criticism of Butler's work that accuses her of being ahistorical is certainly wrong, and I want to suggest that Butler offers one of the few theories that actually try to explain the historicity of political configurations without simply taking it for granted. Butler, however, does not carry out historical investigations herself. It is the lack of concrete investigations of processes of social transformation which is most notable. Thus, not so much an alteration of Butler's theory is required, but rather an application of her theoretical tools in specific political contexts. The second adaptation is concerned with the theory of political and social institutions, or, rather, the lack of such a theory in Butler's work. A political theory of performativity must be advanced by a theory of political institutions that is able to consider their relative stability as well as the possibility of alteration and change.

But most importantly, we need to consider the strengths of Butler's theory that make it worth to receive it in the discipline of political science. A theory that is inspired by Butler can contribute to political theory in six respects: (1) Butler's theory leads to a reintroduction of the subject into the realm of politics and political analysis. Traditionally, the subject has not played a role in political theory. Butler, however, reveals that the traditional view that the subject is prior to the scope of political analysis is itself the result of a process of naturalization, and that this naturalization immunizes the subject against further political contestation and, thereby, secures a specific configuration of politics. For Butler, the subject can no longer be seen as a given fact and, thus, the constitution of the subject becomes a major political concern. (2) In this context it is possible to highlight the connection of subject and power in the process of subjection. Power is not only enforced by one subject on another, but is also at work in the subjection of the subject. Butler puts special emphasis on the role of power in the constitution of the subject. (3) This leads to an expansion of the scope of analyses of power, because if we only analyze the power which is enacted between already established subjects, we ignore the fact that power is already enforced in the constitution of those very subjects. Butler's notion of normative violence highlights the violence enforced by the norms that regulate the processes of subjection and define the realm of possible subject positions. Butler is especially concerned about the status of those that cannot confirm with the norms and who are, therefore, banned from the realm of the possible subject positions. In Butler's view, the power that declares one to be excluded from the realm of the possible subjects is the most violent form of power. (4) Butler's account of the political subject also leads to a theory of a conditioned, but never-

theless strong agency. For Butler, agency is not an inner capacity of the subject, but a contested possibility within a political context of power and domination. This leads again to a critical analysis of power relations, as we have to raise the questions, under which conditions agency becomes possible and which ones hinder its development. (5) A reformulation of Butler's notion of performativity and iterability in the light of a theory of hegemony offers a convincing explanation of the relative stability of political institutions as well as the possibility of change. In this context, Butler's strategy of denaturalization can be characterized as a project of radical repoliticization. She shows that even the foundations of politics are themselves political. (6) In this context Butler's theory, finally, requires new modes of thinking about politics itself. I have called the notion of politics that follows from an understanding of the contingency and ungroundedness of all political categories and the corresponding openness of these categories for permanent contestation and resignification a politics of resignifiability. It has also been highlighted, however, that resignifiability is not in itself a political strategy, and that Butler, thus, supports the necessity of multiple political strategies that need to be contextualized in contingent and open political contexts.

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Abstract

Die vorliegende Arbeit hat das Ziel, eine Lektüre Judith Butler als einer politische Theoretikerin zu präsentieren. Dies impliziert erstens die Forderung nach einer Aufnahme Butlers in den Kanon der politischen Theorie und inkludiert zweitens die weiterführende These, dass Butlers Werk selbst als immanent politisch zu verstehen ist. Bei der Untersuchung von Butlers Beitrag zur politischen Theorie konzentriert sich diese Arbeit auf zwei zentrale Themenfelder: 1. Butlers Konzeption des politischen Subjekts und 2. ihre Theorie der Performativität und der Iterabilität.

Während das Subjekt traditionell in der politischen Theorie keine bedeutende Rolle spielt, fordert Butlers Werk eine Wiedereinführung des Subjekts in die Analyse von Politik, indem sie zeigt, dass das Subjekt keineswegs der Politik vorgängig ist, sondern dass die Konstitution des Subjekts vielmehr als eine zentrale politische Angelegenheit begriffen werden muss. Durch ihre Enthüllung, dass subtile, aber sehr wirkungsvolle Machtformen bereits in der Konstitution des Subjekts am Werk sind, ermöglicht Butler eine Erweiterung von Macht- und Herrschaftsanalysen um Dimensionen der Subjektkonstitution. In diesem Zusammenhang ist vor allem ihr Konzept normativer Gewalt beachtenswert, das dazu dient, die Gewalt hervorzuheben, welche von den die Sphäre der sozialen Intelligibilität regulierenden Normen auf jene ausgeübt wird, die vom Feld der intelligiblen Subjekte ausgeschlossen sind.

Diese Arbeit schlägt vor, Butlers Konzept der Performativität vor dem Hintergrund einer Hegemonietheorie einer Relektüre zu unterziehen, indem die These vertreten wird, dass das Konzept der Performativität nur dann angemessen verstanden werden kann, wenn es in Zusammenhang mit der Macht der hegemonialen Normen bedacht wird. Zugleich gilt es zu berücksichtigen, dass weder Macht noch Normen statische Entitäten sind, sondern auf ihre ständige Wiederholung angewiesen bleiben, um in ihrem Status bestehen zu können. Die daraus folgende, prinzipielle Iterabilität liefert eine Erklärung für die Möglichkeit von sozialem und politischem Wandel. Das Subjekt ist der Ort dieser Wiederholung und entsprechend stellt die Handlungsfähigkeit des Subjekts auch den Ort möglichen Wandels dar. Handlungsfähigkeit wird dabei nicht als eine intrinsische Eigenschaft des Subjekts gedacht, sondern als eine Möglichkeit, die in politischen Kontexten errungen und bewahrt werden muss. Ziel ist die Resignifizierung des Subjekts als einer kritische Kategorie der politischen Theorie, um Untersuchung der sozialen Bedingungen der Möglichkeit von Handlungsfähigkeit in konkreten politischen Kontexten zu ermöglichen.

Butlers Herausforderung der traditionellen politischen Theorie zwingt schließlich dazu, neue Wege zu suchen, um über Politik nachzudenken. Butler vertritt ein Projekt der Denaturalisierung, das heißt sie zeigt, dass sogar die Grundlagen der Politik selbst durchgängig politisch sind. Daher kann das Projekt der Denaturalisierung auch als eine Strategie radikaler Politisierung charakterisiert werden. Für das Konzept von Politik, dass aus dieser Kontingenz aller politischen Kategorien und deren entsprechender Offenheit für ständige Anfechtung und Resignifizierung folgt, schlägt diese Arbeit den Titel einer Politik der Resignifizierbarkeit vor.

The aim of this inquiry is to present a reading of Judith Butler as a political theorist. That implies, first, to support the claim that Butler should be included into the canon of political theory. Second, it means to suggest that politics is at the core of Butler's work. In order to discuss Butler's challenging contribution to political theory, the inquiry focusses on two main themes: 1. Butler's account of the political subject and 2. her theory of performativity and iterability.

Whereas the subject traditionally does not play a significant role in political theory, Butler's work asks for a reintroduction of the subject into the realm of politics and political analysis by showing that the subject is not prior to politics, but rather that the constitution of the subject is a major political concern. She reveals that subtle, but very forceful forms of power are already at work in the constitution of the subject. Thereby, she makes it possible to expand the scope of an analyses of power and domination to the critical investigation of processes of subject formation. In this context, her notion of normative violence is meant to highlight the violence enforced by the norms that define the realm of social intelligibility on those that are excluded from counting as intelligible subjects.

This inquiry suggests to reread Butler's notion of performativity in the light of a theory of hegemony. In other words, it claims that performativity can only be adequately understood when regarded in connection with the power of the hegemonic norms. At the same time, neither power nor the norms are static entities, rather, they are dependent on a permanent reiteration in order to sustain there status. The principal iterability that follows from this necessity of reiteration offers an explanation of the possibility of alteration and social and political change. The subject is the site of this reiteration and, thus, the subject's agency is also the site of possible alteration. In this context, agency is not thought as an inner capacity of the subject, but as a possibility that needs to be achieved and secured in political contexts. In other words, the aim is a resignification of the political subject as a critical category of political theory in order to investigate into the social conditions of possibility of agency in concrete political contexts.

Finally, Butler's challenge of traditional political theory forces us to consider new ways to think about politics itself. Butler supports a project of denaturalization, that means, she shows that even the foundations of politics are themselves political. Hence, the project of denaturalization can be characterized as a strategy of radical politicization. This inquiry labels the notion of politics that follows from the contingency and ungroundedness of all political categories and their corresponding openness for permanent contestation and resignification as a politics of resignifiability.