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Subject trouble

Judith Butler and dialectics

Abstract   In this essay I explore the role of dialectics for how social theory can take account of the problem of structure and agency, or, determination and freedom, in a critical and emancipatory way. I discuss the limits and possibilities of dialectical, and of anti-dialectical, criticisms of Hegelian dialectics. For this purpose, I look at Judith Butler's discussion of dialectics and the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' in her writings between 1987 (*Subjects of Desire*; republished 1999) and 1990 (*Gender Trouble*, republished 2000). Butler's book *Gender Trouble* remains a key text of contemporary feminist theory. Butler formulates in this book a critique of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* based on her claim that Beauvoir makes a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' that implies the notion of the sexed body as a pre-cultural entity. In her earlier writings, though, her evaluation of de Beauvoir had been much more positive. The change in Butler's evaluation of de Beauvoir is part of her increasing rejection of dialectics: Butler rejected in *Gender Trouble* any form of Hegelian dialectics with reference to Luce Irigaray's (1985) claim that it is 'phallogocentric'. Although Butler subsequently returned to Hegelian themes, she seems never to have revoked this claim made in her most momentous work.

I argue that this change in the theoretical structure of Butler's argument weakens her critique of identity politics and I suggest reading Butler backwards, from *Gender Trouble* to the more open discussion of dialectics in her earlier texts. Drawing on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and other formulations of critical theory, I argue that the valid aspects of the critique of Hegelian dialectics can better be formulated as a dialectical critique of dialectics (Adorno; Butler, 1987a) than as a rejection of dialectics (Derrida; Irigaray; Butler, 1990).

Retracing the genealogy of Butler's argument will be a necessary backdrop, too, for evaluating her more recent comments on the Hegelian and 'Frankfurt School' traditions such as her *Adorno Lectures* given in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in November 2002.

Key words Theodor W. Adorno · agency · Judith Butler · Simone de Beauvoir · dialectics · emancipation · G. W. F. Hegel · sex/gender distinction · structure · subjectivity

Judith Butler, celebrated as the author of one of the principal works of contemporary feminist theory, *Gender Trouble* (1990; republished in 2000), in her recent publications has been returning to themes that had also stood at the beginning of her writing career, Hegelian philosophy and the 'Frankfurt School' and Foucault paradigms of critical theory.[1] The publication of her *Adorno Lectures* given in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in November 2002 (Butler, 2003) together with an increasing general interest in Adorno[2] may contribute to a renewal of the discussion of the differences and continuities between 'Frankfurt School' critical theory and Foucauldian 'discourse theory' that were much debated in the 1980s.

In this article, I will concentrate on one particular aspect of the evolution of Butler's theorizing. In the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler refashioned the theoretical structure of the argument that she had gradually developed in earlier contributions: while she had previously presented Michel Foucault as well as herself as *inheritors* of (Marxist-influenced) thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and Monique Wittig, Butler rejected in *Gender Trouble* any form of Hegelian dialectics with reference to Luce Irigaray's (1985) claim that it is 'phall-ogocentric'. Although Butler subsequently returned to Hegelian themes, she seems never to have revoked this claim made in her still most influential work. In the preface to the 1999 republication of her first book, *Subjects of Desire* (originally 1987), Butler writes that its original version had been written in a conceptual framework based on Hegel, Marx, phenomenology and the Frankfurt School which she had studied in Heidelberg and Yale. In the process of revising the manuscript for publication, Butler added chapters on Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Foucault whom at that time she only started appreciating over the former:

> In 1985–86, I was not quite prepared to make the theoretical moves that I begin in the final chapters [of the published version of *Subjects of Desire*] and that I subsequently made in the writing of *Gender Trouble*, published in late 1989. Although at the time of this writing I am not yet ancient, the book reads to me . . . as my juvenilia, which means that I ask the reader to approach it with abundant forgiveness in reserve. (Butler, 1999: viii)

Butler seemed to find the necessity of having made those theoretical moves so self-evident that she refrained from further reflecting on their motivations and implications. Far from holding her 'juvenilia' against her, I suggest that Butler severed in *Gender Trouble* – i.e. in the very instant that she succeeded to articulate her critique of identity-politics

most momentously – the intellectual tradition out of which she had first developed her argument.[3] I argue that *reading Butler backwards*, i.e. tracing back Butler's argument to her writings before *Gender Trouble* and re-appropriating their more open theoretical approach, will sharpen and renew the radical potential of her critique. Furthermore, retracing the genealogy of Butler's argument will be a necessary backdrop for evaluating her more recent comments on the Hegelian and 'Frankfurt School' traditions.[4]

Recovering agency, the body and its meanings[5]

In an essay originally published in 1986 (Butler, 1998a), Butler names as the starting-point of her argument the critique of (post-)structuralist social theory:

> It is usual these days to conceive of gender as passively determined, construc*ted* by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language which precedes and determines the subject itself. Even if gender is rightly understood to be constructed by such systems, it remains necessary to ask after the specific mechanism of this construction. Does this system unilaterally inscribe gender upon the body, in which case the body would be a purely passive medium and the subject utterly subjected? . . . What is the role of personal agency in the reproduction of gender? (Butler, 1998a: 31)

Butler rejects here one-sidedly structuralist emphasis on 'system' or 'structure' and aims to re-introduce the concept of individual choice and 'agency' together with the concepts of 'becoming' and 'performance', couched in the philosophical (existentialist) problematique of *freedom*. Butler refers to de Beauvoir's famous assertion that 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one' in her search for a way to re-introduce a concept of 'agency' against an over-powerful 'system':

> . . . to be a woman is to become a woman . . . gender is a process of constructing ourselves . . . a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the acquisition of a skill, a 'project', to use Sartrean terms. (ibid.)

She argues that 'in keeping "become" ambiguous, Beauvoir formulates gender as a corporeal locus of cultural possibilities both received and innovated' (ibid.: 32). The postulation of a 'choosing agent . . . *seems* to adopt a Cartesian view of the self, an egological structure which lives and thrives prior to language and cultural life' (ibid.; emphasis added). Against the first impression, however (de Beauvoir only *seems* to postulate), 'she must mean something other than an unsituated Cartesian act' (ibid.). Butler highlights de Beauvoir's effort to 'radicalize the Sartrean programme to establish an embodied notion of freedom'.[6] Central to this effort is the position that the 'duality of consciousness

(as transcendence) and the body is intrinsic to human reality' (ibid.: 33). Butler suggests the understanding of

> . . . self-transcendence as itself a corporeal movement. . . . As a condition of access to the world, the body is a being comported beyond itself, sustaining a necessary reference to the world and, thus, never a self-identical natural entity. . . . The body is . . . a mode of becoming. (ibid.)

Butler concludes that de Beauvoir takes 'Sartre at his non-Cartesian best' (ibid.), extending and concretizing his formulations. The argument that de Beauvoir conceives of choice, freedom and agency not in the abstract but *as embodied*, is the basis of Butler's positive assessment of de Beauvoir. Butler points out that the element of choice in de Beauvoir's conception provides

> . . . an alternative to paternalistic explanatory models of acculturation which treat human beings only as products of prior causes, culturally determined in a strict sense, and which, consequently, leave no room for the transformative possibilities of personal agency.
>   By scrutinizing the mechanism of agency and appropriation, Beauvoir is attempting, I believe, to infuse the analysis with emancipatory potential. Oppression . . . is a dialectical force which requires individual participation on a large scale in order to maintain its malignant life. (ibid.: 35)

De Beauvoir, as Butler is right to stress,

> . . . distinguishes between natural facts and their significance, and argues that natural facts gain significance only through their subjection to non-natural systems of interpretation. (ibid.: 39)

De Beauvoir does not, however, imply that 'sex' – the notion that there have always existed, and will always exist precisely *two* sexes – belongs in the category of *facts*. At this point of the text, Butler states unequivocally that for de Beauvoir, 'the sexed body' is *not* 'the natural body'. The natural body merely provides the diffuse multiplicity of all those various corporeal bits and pieces that can be *interpreted* as constitutive of 'sex' by a human spectator who is a member of a particular society:

> The demarcation of anatomical difference does not precede the cultural interpretation of that difference, but is itself an interpretive act laden with normative assumptions. (ibid.: 40)

For de Beauvoir, the body is

> . . . the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted in the flesh . . . and 'existing' one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms. . . . That one becomes one's gender seems now to imply more than the distinction between sex and gender. . . . [De Beauvoir] argues that natural facts gain significance only through their

subjection to non-natural systems of interpretation. . . . The body is, in effect, never a natural phenomenon. (ibid.: 38f.)

Butler concludes that 'Simone de Beauvoir's theory seems implicitly to ask whether sex was not gender all along' (ibid.: 39f.), an implication that only needed to be made explicit by Wittig and Foucault:[7] 'a binary gender system has no ontological necessity'; only 'to a mystified perspective', 'man' and 'woman' appear as 'substantial entities' (ibid.: 40). The merit of a de-mystified, emancipatory position based on de Beauvoir's 'view of gender as a dialectic of recovery and invention' is that it 'grants the possibility of autonomy within corporeal life' (ibid.: 41).

As the idea that there is a binary opposition of exactly two sexes (not more, not less) is constructed by culture, history and society, they can dissolve it, too.[8] As sex was gender all along, historically and culturally contingent social practices that challenge the binary conception of 'gender' do not need to leave 'sex' intact. Far from being a mere issue of terminology, the political point of the rejection of the sex/gender distinction is that the dissolution, or proliferation, of gender can be, and needs to be, extended into the ontological bedrock of 'sex' in order to secure its emancipatory gains. Butler fully developed this argument out of, not against, de Beauvoir already in her first contribution on this issue.

For de Beauvoir, the 'becoming' is never completed, and never even has a determinable beginning. In a related article, Butler argues that we can of course 'posture as if' we had completed our becoming – as if we 'were', or as if we 'had' an identity that we could flag and advertise, and 'smugly inhabit that self-identical place' (Butler, 1989: 255). But even this smug, self-identical person has to maintain his or her identity, has to keep choosing 'to embody a reified concept'. Butler argues that this ongoing maintenance of the alleged identity is 'a constant effort of freedom' (ibid.), of making choices, i.e. of *agency*. Although one is signified 'from the moment of birth' (ibid.: 257), it is the necessity to live one's marks only that makes possible change. The tone of Butler's argument is here enthusiastically dialectical. 'Gender is a mode of becoming that . . . can have no inception and no closure.' The concept of gender is dissolved into movement: 'Woman is no longer a noun, no longer a self-identical substance' (ibid.: 258). De Beauvoir's conception implies a critique of the 'metaphysics of substance': womanliness or manliness are not substances that are *qua being substance* 'causally responsible for certain kinds of behavior' (ibid.), but they are mere process. The dialectical argument denounces the 'metaphysics of substance' as tautological: when sex *is* gender, sex cannot *explain* gender. Gender constitutes sex; it does not reflect sex. Butler suggests that 'perhaps Beauvoir criticizes the notion of gender as a natural substance in much the same way that Sartre disputed the reality of the substantial self' (ibid.). Gender is 'a project, a skill, a

pursuit, an enterprise, even an industry . . . a corporeal style' (ibid.) governed by 'a set of stringent taboos, conventions, and laws', including terror, shame and punishment. The freedom to choose is constrained: one has to choose *against oneself*.[9]

> Gender is a mundane drama specifically corporeal, constrained by possibilities specifically cultural. But this constraint is not without some moments of contingency, of possibility, of unprecedented cultural confusion that will invariably work to destroy the illusion that gender constraint is a dictate from nature. (ibid.)

Again, Butler adopts here a typical double-figure of dialectical social criticism: the illusion of sex as a substance is real only to the extent that it is acted out – 'performed' – on the stage of everyday life (in other words: *essence must appear*), but this necessity not only warrants the possibility of change, but it 'will invariably work' to destroy the illusory essence and give way to something different: social change is inherent in (not external to) the dynamics of social reality.

The sex/gender distinction, the concept of 'transition' and the 'acquisition' of gender

The beauty and the intellectual appeal of de Beauvoir's formulation, one is not born but rather becomes a woman, is that its dialectical tension cannot be arrested in plain language and identitarian concepts. The strength of Butler's respective essays before *Gender Trouble* is that she did not try too hard to settle the account once and for all. The sense that on being born one is designated a 'sex' by representatives of the compact block of society standing at the ready and handing out one of exactly two pre-packed determinations – male or female – which one subsequently spends a lifetime more or less but never quite loyally fulfilling, sits uneasily with the critical-analytical insight that this pre-packaged determination is itself already the product of the complicated dynamics of history and society: sex was gender all along, but gender never is fully identical to sex. This dialectic of sex and gender is reflected in a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in Butler's essays, and these might have motivated her subsequent rejection of dialectics in *Gender Trouble*.

Although de Beauvoir did not use any pair of words that could be translated with 'sex and gender', one could argue that there is a soft form of what in English is the sex/gender distinction in the sense that there is society's brutal assignment of a 'sex' in the moment of birth, and then there are the ways we 'exist' this assignment and actually 'become' (more or less) what we already 'are' by decree. Neither of these

kinds of acts is 'natural', and in this sense de Beauvoir's position implies a rejection of a strong (or rather, naïve) form of sex/gender distinction where 'sex' is assumed to be 'nature' or 'biology'. Although exactly this differentiation can be gleaned from Butler's position, she just as often fails to make it.[10] Butler misrepresents de Beauvoir's argument in two decisive ways: first, she suggests that de Beauvoir presupposed that a 'natural body' actually exists, pre-existing the 'historical' body; second, she falsely identifies the 'natural' with the 'sexed' and the 'historical' with the 'gendered' body. Butler talks about a 'transition from the natural to the historical body' (Butler, 1989: 255) while such a 'transition' cannot exist as the 'natural body' is not accessible to intellection; it is an intellectual abstraction, a (necessary) hypothesis. In de Beauvoir's argument, the process by which the body 'assumes' meaning is a *logical* process that does not imply succession *in time*. In Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, the 'natural' and the 'historical' body are not two distinct entities or two successive stages that the same entity goes through, but two dimensions of *the same object*: the human body is at the same time natural *and* historical. Butler's reading that de Beauvoir's concept of 'becoming a woman' implies that an un-gendered natural body only subsequently 'becomes a woman', de-dialecticizes de Beauvoir's concept of 'becoming' and distorts her point. De Beauvoir should be understood to be saying neither that at the beginning of one's lifelong effort to 'become' one is 'sexed' due to biological fact (as 'sex' is not a fact but already the social interpretation of a series of facts) nor that one starts life as an unsexed, ungendered, 'natural body' (as the moment until the first representative of society will shout or think 'It's a girl' or 'It's a boy' is too short for being enjoyed very much).

As a consequence, when Butler proceeds to ask, 'Who is the "I", the subject, who is said to execute this process of becoming . . . , who acquires gender . . .?' (ibid.), she does not ask a question that de Beauvoir would have needed to find unsettling. Because Butler re-interprets the dialectical concept of 'becoming' as a temporal process of gender 'acquisition', she (but not de Beauvoir) needs to find a not-yet-gendered subject who 'does the becoming', who 'acquires' a gender. The concept of 'acquisition' is a reifying moment in Butler's argument that seems to seduce her to hold (against better knowledge) that the natural body is the sexed body.

The shift of argument in *Gender Trouble*

The point of departure of *Gender Trouble* is a reconsideration of 'the status of "women" as the subject of feminism' (Butler, 1990: ix).[11] Butler's critique of the 'foundationalism' and the underlying

'metaphysics of substance' (ibid.: 10) of the feminist 'we' is based on a formulation borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*[12] which recurs throughout the book like a red thread:

> (T)here is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything. (ibid.: 25)

Butler aims to formulate a 'critical genealogy' of which 'the critical point of departure is *the historical present*, as Marx put it' (Butler, 1990: 5).[13] She writes that 'the internal stability and binary frame for sex is effectively secured' by 'casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain' (Butler, 1990: 7). Butler writes that 'the controversy over the meaning of *construction* appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism' (ibid.: 8). Overcoming this polarity is the *leitmotif* of *Gender Trouble*.[14]

The Nietzschean notion of agency without a subject underlies here Butler's re-assessment of de Beauvoir. She claims in *Gender Trouble* that the 'becoming' in de Beauvoir's formulation, 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one', still preserves the idea of a presupposed subject, of a *doer behind the deed* of becoming: she criticizes de Beauvoir for implying 'an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender' (ibid.: 8). Butler asks, 'who is this "one" who does the becoming?' (ibid.: 111) and interprets de Beauvoir's paradoxical statement as saying that one is born sexed but 'acquires' a gender.[15] She insinuates thus the existence of a sex/gender distinction in de Beauvoir's writing that is not there,[16] and equates the 'sexed body' with the 'natural body' in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

The contradictory character of Butler's reading of de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble* is evident in the following passage:

> Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence. The theory of embodiment informing Beauvoir's analysis is clearly limited by the uncritical reproduction of the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body (ibid.: 12). . . . Despite my own previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms.

Butler implies that the Sartrean

> . . . synthesis requires and maintains the ontological distinction between body and mind of which it is composed and, by association, the hierarchy of mind over body and of masculine over feminine. (ibid.: 153)

However, Butler fails to make a convincing case for her surprising claim that Sartre's and de Beauvoir's dialectics are 'clearly' (ibid.: 12) Cartesian.[17] Positing this judgement as self-evident, she extends it with a reference to Luce Irigaray (1985):

> The preservation of that very distinction [of sex and gender] can be read as symptomatic of the very phallogocentrism that Beauvoir under-estimates.[18] (ibid.: 12)

Butler introduces the reference to 'phallogocentrism' – a concept that she had earlier denounced as just another example of one-sided structuralism (Butler, 1998a: 32; see above) – almost silently.[19]

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler touches only briefly on de Beauvoir, and it seems that the almost silent shift in her assessment of de Beauvoir is a function of her detailed discussion of two other French theorists, Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault. Butler's criticisms of Wittig and Foucault are indeed strikingly similar to those of de Beauvoir, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: all are found guilty of being still too close to the dialectical tradition and of quietly propping up the outdated 'humanist' notion of a 'Cartesian' or 'pre-discursive' subject. Especially in contrast to Butler's earlier perceptive elaboration on the dialectics of de Beauvoir's position, her criticisms of Foucault and Wittig in *Gender Trouble* illustrate the limitations of her theory in its anti-dialectical mood to accommodate history and society.

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault illustrates his thesis of the historical specificity of the modern regime of sexuality with a documented episode that happened in France in 1867: a farmhand fell victim to the emerging legal and medical apparatus that was about to become typical of the modern state after having committed certain sexual acts that Foucault describes not without sympathy and solidarity as an 'everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality', 'inconsequential bucolic pleasures' (Foucault, 1979: 31). Foucault writes:

> So it was that our society . . . assembled around these timeless gestures, these barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and alert children, a whole machinery for speechifying, analyzing, and investigating. (Foucault, 1979: 32)

Butler reproaches Foucault for the sympathetic words he has for 'bucolic' pre-bourgeois pleasures and argues they contradict his 'official' rejection of the discourse of 'emancipation' (Butler, 1990: 97): she suspects that sympathies for 'bucolic' pleasures supply Foucault with the ontological point of reference for a secretly – against himself – cultivated utopia of sexual liberation or emancipation:[20]

> Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality 'before the law', indeed, a sexuality waiting for emancipation from the shackles of 'sex'. (ibid.)

For Foucault there is indeed a sexuality 'before the law' if that means before the emergence of modern bourgeois, capitalist society. Foucault's is an analysis of the transformation of sexuality into its modern,

contemporary 'western' form for which purpose Foucault investigates – in this case – documents relating to events that happened in the year 1867 in France. Foucault does not say, however, that sexuality 'before the law' (e.g. before 1867) had not been the effect of 'power/discourse', nor is he presenting those bucolic pleasures as the ideal form of sexuality to which we ought to return in a utopian future. He does imply, however, that knowledge of how different sexuality was 'before the law' can help in thinking about how different it may be *after* 'the law' and will also inspire its 'performative redeployments' in the present.

Butler's comments on Foucault's discussion of the journals of Herculine Barbin, the Hermaphrodite, as 'sentimental indulgence' (Butler, 1990: 96) are similarly questionable. Foucault's point seems to me that the 'happy limbo of a non-identity' (ibid.: 100) – indeed a utopian moment, a short-lived anticipation of the better state of things – was both produced *and* destroyed by an extremely identitarian and repressive society. Herculine recognizes herself as 'the plaything of an impossible dream' (Foucault quoted ibid.: 105). Herculine's suicide demonstrates that the dream of non-identity, in a dialectical sense a product of identitarian society itself, is 'impossible' within the framework of that same society. While Foucault might perhaps over-emphasize the positive moments in Herculine's fate, Butler comes to the strangely pessimistic conclusion that it is

> . . . testimony to the law's uncanny capacity to produce only those rebellions that it can guarantee will – out of fidelity – defeat themselves and those subjects who, utterly subjected, have no choice but to reiterate the law of their genesis. (ibid.: 106)

In her discussion of Herculine's case, Butler denies the *leitmotif* and starting-point of her project, the exploration of the possibility of performative agency against apparently all-powerful 'structure'. Butler correctly paraphrases Foucault's point that 'we must not think that by saying yes to sex we say no to power' (a rather obvious point that seems to have been targeted at 1970s Reichians) (ibid.: 97) but we can (with Foucault) anticipate that one of the effects of a no to 'power' will be (and to some extent already is) the emergence of a 'multiplicity of pleasures', although they need not necessarily be bucolic and innocent.

In a similar vein, Butler rejects Monique Wittig's suggestion[21] that the 'normalization' of (in Freud's sense, 'infantile') diffuse sexuality towards exclusively genital sexuality ought to be 'inverted' because 'inversion' was inevitably 'committed to the very model of normalization' itself (ibid.: 27). Butler's rejection of the concept of 'inversion' is coextensive with that of the dialectic: she argues that it presupposes a 'binary relation', a 'singular, oppositional alternative' between 'diffuse' and 'genital' sexuality. However, it is doubtful whether Wittig's use of

the concept of 'inversion' necessarily carries such implications: 'inverting' the closures, exclusions and normalizations imposed by capitalist modernity must not mean a return to an (imagined) prior state of unspoiled perfection, although it may mean mobilizing some of the memories of pre-bourgeois conditions in the service of something new and unknown. Butler's conclusion that in Wittig's writing 'polymorphous perversity, assumed to exist prior to the marking by sex, is valorized as the telos of human sexuality' (ibid.: 27) distorts the thrust of Wittig's writings.

> If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before', 'outside', or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. (ibid.: 30)

Butler seems to demand here that one ought to dream only 'practicable' dreams that do not deflect from 'contemporary' practices of subverting 'power itself' as it currently exists. This rather bizarre statement reveals the positivist and 'realist' implications of the turn against dialectics. The important insight that subversive practices in the present can at best be partial anticipations of a better state of affairs is a verdict neither against all contemporary practices nor against the dreams that inspire them. The postulation of normative utopias is certainly not a 'cultural impossibility', although the characteristics of those who formulate such utopias are indeed culturally (more precisely: socially and historically) determined. However, the contradictions intrinsic to modern society enable thinking and imagining to transcend that form of society. It is perhaps the most characteristic aspect of dialectical critical theory that the critic of society neither can nor needs to be positioned 'outside society' or 'before power'. It asserts that a different society is conceivable despite and within the presently existing society's tendency to totalizing closure.[22] The normative, utopian notions that are inevitably involved in giving direction and purpose to subversive, critical practices in the present – including what Foucault and Butler perceptively describe as the transformative 'redeployments', 'displacements' and 'proliferations' of existing power relations – do not need to be formulated 'outside power' or 'outside the law' – they 'merely' need to focus the intrinsic contradictions of existing society conceptually in such a way as to point beyond it.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler exiles de Beauvoir into the backwater of traditional feminism whereas in her earlier essays she had acknowledged and celebrated the emancipatory power of de Beauvoir's dialectical concept of embodied freedom and agency and the concept that the body

in society receives meaning only *from* society, not out of itself. The ideas that there is a sex/gender dichotomy in de Beauvoir, that the 'sexed' is the 'natural' body and that the Hegelian-Sartrean concept of 'becoming' presupposes a pre-social subject who 'does' the becoming, had been, in her earlier essays, a contradiction within her affirmative reading of de Beauvoir. This reading leads to the rejection of de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble*. While she had previously rejected Irigaray's claim that Hegelian dialectics were 'phallogocentric' when she understood dialectics to be an open, dynamic form of thinking, in *Gender Trouble* she embraced Irigaray's position. In her earlier essays, she had praised de Beauvoir's conception for being emancipatory *qua* being dialectical. When she came to understand dialectics to be a closed, mechanical form of thinking, she also came to reject de Beauvoir and formulated her own criticism of feminist 'foundationalism' in opposition to, not any more in continuity with, *The Second Sex*. Butler's (polemical) question, *Who is the doer who does the becoming?*, makes sense only when the dialectical interpenetration of being and becoming is given up. Butler creates the problem that she argues de Beauvoir leaves unresolved by trivializing – de-dialecticizing – de Beauvoir's argument, insinuating to de Beauvoir a 'doer' who first *is* (allegedly an un-sexed Cartesian subject) and only subsequently *becomes* (a woman).

In her earlier book, *Subjects of Desire*, Butler made a remark on Foucault that – by way of contrast – highlights the change in her approach:

> Foucault thus remains a tenuous dialectician, but his is a dialectic without a subject and without teleology, a dialectic unanchored in which the constant inversion of opposites leads not to a reconciliation in unity, but to a proliferation of oppositions which come to undermine the hegemony of binary opposition itself. (Butler, 1987a: 225)

Butler praised Foucault here as a critical inheritor of Hegel in words strongly evocative of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, while in *Gender Trouble* she came to bury Foucault for the very same reasons.

It is my contention that the critical and most valid aspects of Butler's position are grounded in a careful deployment of (negative) dialectics, not in the Derridean rejection of dialectics. This will become clear from a brief look at her argument in *Subjects of Desire*.

From *Gender Trouble* to *Subjects of Desire*

The concepts of identity and the performative 'building of oneself' have already been central to Butler's first book, *Subjects of Desire* (Butler, 1987a). Its starting-point is a discussion of a normative moral ideal

inherent in classical western philosophy, the question of the philosophical, i.e. *the good*, rational and intelligent life. The personification of this moral ideal is the 'philosopher of metaphysical impulses, this being of intelligent desire' (ibid.: 3) who manages to integrate desire (a potentially dangerous, unreasonable force because 'narrow, focused, interested, and engaged') with reason and 'clear vision'. The 'philosophical life' is defined in this tradition as 'the pursuit of integrity': only the 'unified subject' (ibid.: 4) can possibly lead a 'moral life' based on 'true autonomy' and freedom instead of 'repression' and unfreedom (at least, if the only alternative concept of the 'philosopher void of affect' [ibid.: 3] is left aside). Moral action as a 'function of moral life' is more than conformity to a moral rule – it 'must be "given to oneself" in the Kantian sense'. From this background in moral philosophy, morality and *the good life* have been linked to 'identity, unity, and integration' (ibid.: 5).

A demand that is meant to be recognized as reasonable must be possible to realize. 'For Spinoza and Hegel, the metaphysical place of the human subject is articulated through the immanent rationality of desire' (ibid.). If there were desires that did not (at least potentially) abide by rationality, 'the human subject, as a desiring being, would constantly risk metaphysical homelessness and internal fragmentation'. Butler argues that the works of Hegel's French interpreters including Kojève, Hyppolite and Sartre have been 'so many meditations on the viability of this philosophical ideal' (ibid.: 6). Growing doubts whether desire can be reasonable at all led them to revisions of 'Hegel's version of the autonomous subject' (ibid.). The dissolution of the integrated and integrating subject points to the 'insurpassability of the negative' (ibid.: 7), i.e. what cannot be integrated into the self-identical subject. Butler stresses the Hegelian character of this tradition of thought:

> Importantly, the Hegelian subject is not a self-identical subject who travels smugly from one ontological place to another; it *is* its travels, and *is* every place in which it finds itself. (ibid.: 8)

In other words: being is becoming. Hegel's 'desire', according to Butler, is the 'pursuit of knowledge' and the 'pursuit of identity' that is always frustrated because there is always more to be experienced and to be known. Desire is 'a corporeal questioning of identity and place' (ibid.: 9).

Particularly important for the understanding of the essays on sex and gender that Butler went on to write is her comparative discussion of Hegel's critique of how Spinoza overcame Descartes's dualism of mind and body 'which highlights Hegel's own skepticism towards metaphysical closure' (ibid.: 10). In Spinoza's monistic conception, corporeal 'appetites' and intellectual 'will' are 'two dimensions of an integral being' which taken together are termed 'desire' (for Spinoza the 'essence of man') (ibid.: 11). Butler argues that 'Hegel clearly applauds Spinoza's

monistic refutation of the Cartesian mind/body dualism', in which he sees 'the incipient moments of a dialectical theory of identity'. For Hegel, Spinoza's monism is 'a significant philosophical precedent for promoting a metaphysical monism capable of internal differentiation' (ibid.: 12). Nevertheless, Hegel still found that 'with Spinoza, there is too much God': Spinoza overemphasized the self-activity of 'Substance' (the approximate equivalent of 'totality' in Hegel) and not enough autonomy for the individual human subject and its self-consciousness. This is where Butler sees the epochal break between Spinozism and the idealism of Kant and Hegel: the *subject* takes over centre stage from the *substance*. Hegel's more modern conception is preferable to Spinoza's because in the more modern, 'idealist' conception the dialectic between structure and agency is more open and better balanced.

The chapter 'Trouble and Longing: The Circle of Sexual Desire in *Being and Nothingness*' (Butler, 1987a: 138–56) can be read as if it was chapter Zero of *Gender Trouble*: the concept of 'trouble' links both texts to a formulation by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: 'desire is defined as trouble' (quoted in Butler, 1987a: 138).[23] Butler's discussion of Sartre is pivoted on another examination of the mind/body problem, epitomized in the counterintuitive formulation that '[i]n Sartre's account it is the body that follows upon consciousness' (ibid.: 149) – an antecedent of Butler's later claim that sex follows upon gender.

Butler argues that for Sartre, 'freedom purified of the body is an impossibility' (ibid.: 139). Although being 'the limit to freedom', the body is 'the unsurpassable condition of individuation'; it 'mediates and determines freedom' and 'the various projects of choice' (ibid.). For this reason, 'the body is never *purely* factic; it is equally a perspective and a set of intentional relations' (ibid.: 140). Freedom is not only the effort to transcend corporeal limits but as well 'a constant effort to affirm the corporeal ties to the world which compose one's *situation*'. Butler highlights that 'the notion of *situation*' radically qualifies 'the *ex nihilo* character of freedom' (ibid.): the body is 'a way of situating oneself in the world'. It is both the 'distance from the world and the condition of our access' (ibid.: 144), 'both contingency and project'.[24] Butler presents the French reception of Hegel as a process whereby consciousness more and more has come to be seen as embodied. She sees this as

> . . . the phenomenological fulfillment of Hegel's early contention that desire both constitutes and reveals the relations that bind the self with its world. To make Hegel's doctrine concrete, human desire must be shown . . . to signify . . . an embodied and historically situated self.

In Sartre's writing, 'desire comes to be seen as a *choice*, a *judgement*, and a *project of transfiguration*'. Although 'desire is always and only

resolved in the imaginary' (ibid.: 96), 'the factic aspect of existence, particularly the body, cannot be wholly self-created': *bodies matter*, as it were.[25]

Butler's argument in *Subjects of Desire* can be clearly recognized as the theoretical grounding for her critique of the sex/gender distinction and her argument for reasserting subversive (feminist) agency against structure, power and 'the law': the idea that the 'pursuit of identity' can never fully subject the non-identical and thus always strives beyond identity is shown by Butler to be based in the critique of a Cartesian mind/body dualism as the (human) mind and body are understood to constitute each other mutually. The body is not merely the limit but also the condition and the medium of freedom – the pursuit of which means *trouble*.

Dialectical or anti-dialectical critique of dialectics?

Despite the continuity in the content of the argument, the differences between how the same theoretical issues are treated in Butler's earlier texts and in *Gender Trouble* are striking. To my knowledge, Butler never published anything that would explicitly engage with this aspect of *Gender Trouble*. This leaves it open to interpretation what motivated these differences.

The paradox is that Butler in *Gender Trouble* accuses the dialectical tradition (represented by de Beauvoir) for not being dialectical enough – only, she uses the word differently (namely the way Derrida and Irigaray used it). While authors in the tradition of dialectical critical theory (such as Adorno) understand dialectics as an emancipatory, critical, dynamic and open way of thinking (much like Butler herself in *Subjects of Desire*), Butler in *Gender Trouble* refers with the same term to a closed and mechanical way of thinking which the former would find to be *un*dialectical and inadequate to understanding social and cultural practices in an antagonistic society. What in the view of the former (and in my own view) ought to be a dialectical critique of dialectics is carried out as an anti-dialectical critique of dialectics.

Carrie L. Hull (1997) observed that Butler's critique of identity and identitarian thinking (Butler, 1990, 1993) resembles in many ways that formulated by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1990). My examination of the contradiction between that resemblance and Butler's Derridean rejection (in *Gender Trouble*) of dialectics has led me to the conclusion that Butler seems to have invoked the Derrida/Irigaray theorem that dialectics is 'phallogocentric' in order to escape the contradictions inherent in de Beauvoir's argument as she understood it. However, as these have been shown to be contradictions of Butler's

reading of de Beauvoir, not of de Beauvoir's actual argument, Butler's rejection of dialectics in *Gender Trouble* is unnecessary, is confusing and weakens the thrust of her own argument. Her basic project, the examination of how *agency/freedom/autonomy* relate to *structure/system/determination* is substantially dialectical and in harmony with similar arguments developed in the context of dialectical (in particular, 'Frankfurt School') critical theory. The proposition made by Hull to 'defend the content of most of Butler's arguments' by taking Adorno's perspective (Hull, 1997: 22)[26] can thus be based in an appreciation of the extent to which they share the same theoretical background.

I will on the final pages look at three aspects of what the shared ground is, but also what the position developed by Butler could gain from being re-connected to the dialectical tradition of critical theory: the critique of reducing the manifoldly different to the straightforwardly contradictory; the critique of identity; the critique of the simple opposition of freedom to determination.

The concept of dialectics that is rejected by Butler is a rather one-sided understanding of dialectics. In an interview, Butler remarked:

> I accept the Derridean notion that every dialectical opposition is produced through a set of exclusions, and that what is outside the dialectic – which is not a negation – cannot be contained by the dialectic. (Butler in Osborne and Segal, 1994: 35)

Derrida's critique, however, a simple (undialectical) negation of Hegelian dialectics, leaves out what is *outside* the *Hegelian concept* of dialectics – the *negative* dialectics.[27] In the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno mentions that earlier critics of (Hegelian) dialectics – he names Trendelenburg, the author of a book on Aristotelian logics of 1870, and Benedetto Croce – had already argued that dialectics reduced the full diversity of the different to the straightforwardly contradictory. Adorno did not try to deny the charge. Instead, he returned the accusation: the fault is not that of the method but that of its object. Blaming dialectics for the reduction means blaming the messenger for the bad news when dialectics is merely 'the ontology of the wrong state of things' (Adorno, 1990: 10f.). The dialectical method that reduces the multiply different to the contradictory is 'appropriate to the abstract monotony' of the 'administered world' (ibid.: 8).[28] Like the cunning Odysseus, dialectical thinking mimics its object in order to escape it. However, it 'has come to be and will pass, like antagonistic society' (ibid.: 141).

And so will 'identity', it remains to be hoped. Butler and Adorno share the rejection of 'identitarian thinking' as Hull observed (see above), but Adorno, much more than Butler, struggles to point to a specific socio-historical context that helps in *explaining why* identity

could become the hegemonic and omnipresent social form of subjectivity that it now is: he writes that people develop 'invariant pictures' of themselves because they have to equate themselves and each other with things, most prominently when they have to reduce themselves on the market-place to mere embodiments of labour power:

> If men no longer had to equate themselves with things, they would need neither a thing-like superstructure nor an invariant picture of themselves, after the model of things. (Adorno, 1990: 103)

Adorno is thus able to point (at least implicitly) towards a perspective where the societal compulsion to 'have' or 'be' an identity could vanish (the abolition of the capitalist regime of selling and buying labour-power), while it is difficult to see how Butler's conception could lead to more than the insistence that anti-identitarian 'redeployments' of identity are *possible*, and the (implicit) appeal that people *should not* make invariant pictures of themselves. The tricky question is, if subversion is possible, and also much more enjoyable than conformism, then why is there so little of it?

The crucial category that is necessary to discuss this question is that of *society*.[29] Critical theorists have insisted (against sociological positivism) that 'the investigation of the relation between individuals and society' is different from 'the study of the interdependence of individuals and groups' (quoted from a publication of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in Jacoby, 1975: 181). The loss of the concept of society means that 'a social constellation is banalized to an immediate human network' (Jacoby, 1975: 136). The relevance of the concept of 'society' (in distinction from 'networks', etc.) is that it allows us to see the antagonism between immediate social relations and networks on the one hand, and the non-immediate configuration that dominates them, on the other. The 'specifically social' – i.e. what makes a (modern) society a society – 'consist(s) precisely in the imbalance of institutions over men' (Adorno, 1989: 267); despite being a specific set of relationships between human beings, society is inhuman. Its characteristic is 'the dependency of all individuals on the totality which they form' (ibid.: 268) and which in turn constitutes them as (bourgeois) individuals.

Of course, exactly this kind of argument can be made using other words (as Foucault often did). However, 'language', 'the law', 'phallogocentrism', 'culture' and 'power' are concepts that seem to set a limit to de-essentializing the ways we think about social relations: they retain (sometimes against the critical intentions of those who use them) an aura that immunizes them from historical critique. This quasi-inherent resistance of the concept against its de-construction[30] tends to be much weaker in the concept whose near-absence from Butler's vocabulary

could be a legacy of her earlier engagement with Sartrean existential-ism, *society*.[31]

The compulsion to adopt an identity, the 'all-powerful principle of identity that 'works towards the extinction of their [the individuals'] personal identities' (Adorno, 1989: 268) is one of the significant features of modern society. Adorno argues that 'the abstraction implicit in the market system' (ibid.: 271) 'represents the domination of the general over the particular, of society over its captive membership'. One of the touchstones of social criticism is how it conceives of the possibility of resistance to society under the regime of identity.[32] In order to account for the possibility of change, the dialectic of structure and agency needs to be understood as precarious and open. Butler's early readings of de Beauvoir pointed to this openness as one of her most important achievements, and also in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993), Butler distanced herself from structuralist conceptions that simply replace the subject 'Human' by another pre-existing subject, be that 'Culture', 'Discourse', or 'Power'. It is worthwhile therefore to compare some characteristic formulations by Butler and by Adorno:

> If the subject is *neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were. (Butler, 1997: 17)

> Individuality is the product of pressure as well as the energy center for resistance to this pressure. (Adorno, 1990: 279f.)

> Within subjection the price of existence is subordination. Precisely at the moment in which choice is impossible, the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence. This pursuit is not choice, but neither is it necessity. (Butler, 1997: 20)

> Men must act in order to change the present petrified conditions of existence, but the latter have left their mark so deeply on people . . . that they scarcely seem capable of the spontaneity necessary to do so. . . . Integral society . . . keeps an eye out to make sure that anything which is thought or said serves some specific change or has, as they put it, something positive to offer. . . . Society can be recognized as a universal block, both within men and outside them at the same time. Concrete and positive suggestions for change merely strengthen this hindrance. (Adorno, 1989: 275)

> There is no opposition to power which is not itself part of the very workings of power . . . agency is implicated in what it opposes . . . 'emancipation' will never be the transcendence of power as such. (Butler, 1995: 137)

These statements are strikingly similar; the difference lies in the tone of the wording. Both authors point to the difficulty, but not the impossibility of resistance. Both refuse (like Marx before them) to hand out blueprints (in Adorno's words, 'any preconceptions as to where it might

lead' [Adorno, 1989: 275]). Both authors' critique applies equally to both social democratic or Labour reformism and 'politics of difference' as two sides of the same (false) coin as identity and generality reside both inside and outside the individuals, whom they increasingly tend to domineer. Adorno, though, is more unequivocal in his rejecting piecemeal reformism. Both authors acknowledge that the touchstone of resistance is to challenge the 'universal block'. Both describe *de facto* the situation that we all know best, that of the subject *in bourgeois society*. The language Butler uses, however, allows her account to be read as that of an anthropological universal – an assumed human condition of having to be subjected to 'power', a conceptual ambivalence that she may have inherited from existentialism as well as from structuralism. The vagueness of a concept like 'power as such' weakens her statement: everything here depends on how one chooses to define 'power'.[33] Both authors also agree that emancipation develops from *within* what it opposes. However, in the context of Adorno's dialectical critical theory this fact is embraced as a virtue[34] while Butler's formulations convey a melancholic undertone as if its immanence made emancipation less powerful compared with its coming from somewhere outside, before or beyond the existing social relations.

In their criticism of dialectics, Derrida, Irigaray and – partially – Butler, unlike Adorno, throw out the dialectical baby with the Hegelian bathwater. I suggest that reading Butler backwards, from *Gender Trouble* through the earlier essays to her study of the French reception of Hegel in *Subjects of Desire* which feature a more open and flexible conception of dialectical thinking, strengthens the more radical elements of Butler's criticism. Cutting it off from the dialectical tradition does a disservice to her critique. The radical conclusions without the dialectical argument are disembodied like the grin without the cat.

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Notes

1   Butler has returned to discussing Hegel and the concept of dialectic in *The Psychic Life of Power, Theories in Subjection* (Butler, 1997) and her contributions to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (Butler, Laclau and Žižek, 2000).
2   An important feminist publication in the huge field of literature on Adorno is O'Neill, 1999.
3   *Gender Trouble* will continue to exert its powerful influence on feminist and other critical discussions independently from Butler's more recent

writings especially since these are not explicitly formulated as revisions of, or with reference to, *Gender Trouble*.

4 I do not in the present article suggest a comprehensive analysis of the whole argument of *Gender Trouble*. Butler's comments on de Beauvoir in *Gender Trouble* are a subordinate aspect of her discussion of the Marxist, Monique Wittig. The rejection of (Hegelian) dialectics is part of a decision to articulate the criticism of sexual identity not any more in continuation with, but in opposition to, Hegel, Marx, Sartre and Beauvoir. Central to Wittig's version of anti-essentialism (1992) is her reliance on Marx's concept of fetishism and the real-abstract character of fetishized social relations, categories similarly relevant for Adorno (1990).

Whether or in what way the scattered remarks on gender issues by Marx, Adorno and others could be developed into a dialectical theory of gender would (hopefully, will) be the subject of another essay. Central to such a project I would consider the writings of Monique Wittig (1992) and Mario Mieli (1980), which I discussed in my unpublished MA dissertation 'The real-abstract character of fetishized social relations' (1997). Some of the thoughts of the present essay have first been outlined in my 'Leer a Butler al revés. Sobre en lo que uno se convierte, en lo que uno se incluye y lo que uno no es', *Bajo el Volcán, Revista del posgrado de sociología de la Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla* 6(2003): 108–41.

5 I refer in this section to three selected texts: 'Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*' (Butler, 1998a; originally published in 1986 in *Yale French Studies*); 'Variations on Sex and Gender, Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault' (Butler, 1987b; originally published in *Praxis International*); and 'Gendering the Body: Beauvoir's Philosophical Contribution' (Butler, 1989; a contribution to a reader on feminist philosophy).

6 This reading of de Beauvoir has recently been confirmed by Sandford, 1999 and Stavro, 2000.

7 Butler mentions that Foucault had been a student of Merleau-Ponty whose influence had already been crucial to de Beauvoir's theorizing (1998a: 40). Merleau-Ponty argued in *Phenomenology of Perception* that 'for the body to have meaning for us' it 'must be signified within an historically specific discourse of meaning' (Butler, 1989: 254).

8 There is of course ample evidence provided by anthropologists and ethnologists suggesting that different forms of society and different historical periods have produced different interpretations of the human body, including different sex/gender systems. This cannot be discussed here.

9 Butler refers here affirmatively to the Marxist feminist Monique Wittig who had rejected the idea that there is a sex/gender distinction in de Beauvoir (Wittig, 1992). Butler agrees that de Beauvoir 'occasions an historical understanding not only of gender, but of sex as well' (Butler, 1989: 261). I suspect that few feminists ever maintained as strong a sex/gender distinction as it has been claimed. Gayle Rubin, for example, came close to equating sex and gender when she wrote that 'gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes' (Rubin, 1975: 179).

10 De Beauvoir's formulations 'suggest a distinction between the natural body and the body as an historical construct or signifier – this is the distinction

between *sex* and *gender* . . . how is it that a natural body becomes histori-cally constructed as a gendered body, which subsequently disguises itself as a natural fact? . . . Thus, it is one thing to be born a female, but quite another to undergo proper acculturation as a woman . . .' (Butler, 1989: 254). Butler points out herself that a 'natural body' does not exist – at least not as an object of knowledge or consciousness – but formulates this against de Beauvoir (ibid.: 253). Cf. as well her formulation: 'if sex is the anatomi-cal facticity of binary difference among human bodies, and if gender is the cultural significance that sex comes to assume . . .' (ibid.: 261).

11 In *Gender Trouble*, the philosophical issues are embedded in and subordi-nated to strategic questions basic to the movement addressed by the text. This might partly explain why the break in the theoretical framework of Butler's argument has never been an issue of contention in the reception of the book (as far as my knowledge goes). Butler makes her strategic interest perfectly clear: 'Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category . . . even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes' (Butler, 1990: 4). Butler's intention is to reformulate the category 'woman' in a way that provokes fewer 'refusals', i.e. to make it a more inclusive and efficient category. The merits of her basic contention that coalition-building should be based on open dialogue rather than on assemblages of fixed identity positions are beyond dispute; it has lost nothing of its relevance (cf. Butler's perceptive remark that 'the nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity is linked to the disparagement of the cultural, and with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left' [Butler, 1998b: 38]). The question is how to proceed from there, and here lies the relevance of discussing *how* Butler argues.

12 From the First Essay, section 13, of *Genealogy of Morals*. The prominent use of this quote signals another dimension of the shift in Butler's argument: the reassertion of 'agency' against overemphasis of 'system' or 'structure' is replaced by a critique of 'the doer' or 'the subject' in terms of 'the deed'.

13 Butler credits Marx with having introduced the 'move' to 'expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity' into 'cultural critique' (Butler, 1990: 33). In a similar vein, Butler stresses in *Bodies That Matter* that 'matter has a history' (Butler, 1993: 29), suggest-ing that the 'matter' of Marx's materialism is *practice*, transformative activity itself, and has therefore always a temporal dimension (Butler, 1993: 250). Butler points here to an aspect that these three (otherwise rather different) theorists – Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault – have in common: the insight that the present is (also) *crystallized past* and needs to be understood as such.

14 'Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of "women", the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought' (Butler, 1998a: 2). In other words, Butler argues that this category is intrinsically antagonistic, an instrument of oppression as well as of emancipation. Her argument is in the first place a criticism of (feminist) liberalism, i.e. the argument that women

ought to be 'more fully represented in language and politics' (ibid.). The liberal ('juridical', in Foucault's sense) concept of emancipation logically presupposes the existence of 'women' as a 'subject' pre-existing 'the law' (i.e. the social contract, the institution of the triangle of society, individual and the state) and a notion of what '*fully* represented' means, namely a notion of 'justice'. The Foucauldian critique of liberalism is that a subject cannot 'receive justice' because (in-)justice is what constitutes the subject in the first place. Further down in the text, Butler describes the category of 'women' as a 'reification' (ibid.: 5).

15 'Indeed, for Beauvoir, sex is immutably factic, but gender acquired . . . gender is the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body' (ibid.: 111f.).

16 This has been observed earlier by Sandford (1999) and confirmed by the more recent discussion of de Beauvoir by Stavro (2000) that is in keeping with Butler, 1987b and in contrast to Butler, 1990. Sandford argues that an implicit distinction between sex and gender is characteristic of the most traditional articulations of feminism, starting from Mary Wollstonecraft, while Simone de Beauvoir actually managed to side-step and *overcome* this distinction: 'it is less de Beauvoir than Butler herself who cannot exorcise the ghost of this distinction, despite the radical implications of her own gender theory' (Sandford, 1999: 22).

17 With her notion that Beauvoir 'suggests a synthesis' of mind and body Butler trivializes the dialectical structure of Beauvoir's formulation by pressing it into the mechanical schoolbook schema of triplicity. However, dialectical thinking – not even Hegel's – rarely ever corresponds to this schema. Adorno observed that Hegel's *philosophy* was a philosophy of origin, conceiving the 'synthesis' as a return to the origin (Adorno, 1990: 158f.) while the structure of Hegel's *thinking* – his philosophical practice – was at odds with this abstract principle. Critical theory's relation to Hegel is, in this sense, understood by Adorno so as to salvage Hegel's thinking from its own conception – to develop its identity against its identification.

18 'Phallogocentrism' is a feminist rearticulation of Derrida's 'logocentrism'. Mark Poster, in an attempt to defend Sartre against a Derridean accusation of 'logocentrism', explains: 'The problem which Derrida properly raises is that intellection is often privileged by the philosopher in such a way that the necessary distinction between the concept and the object is abolished' (Poster, 1979: 46), i.e. the logocentric philosopher claims that the truth is actually 'present' in the concept. In this specific context – the critique of a particular form of philosophical idealism – the concept has its proper place.

19 Butler criticizes Irigaray for constructing with the generic concept of 'phallogocentrism' the 'masculinist signifying economy' as global (1998a: 13) but nevertheless maintains Irigaray's point that 'dialectic' is 'monologic' and one of the tactics used by 'masculinist signifying economies' for the 'appropriation and suppression of the Other' (ibid.: 14).

Irigaray's theory suggests that the concept of the two sexes, 'man' and 'woman', serves the interests of men to exclude women from being signified: women are unrepresentable in such male-made categories. Butler is aware and critical of 'Irigaray's occasional efforts to derive a specific feminine

sexuality from a specific female anatomy' (Butler, 1990: 29) but leaves it open whether 'a discourse of biology' is here adopted 'for purely strategic reasons' or whether it is 'in fact, a feminist return to biological essentialism' (ibid.: 30). In the first chapter of *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993), Butler elaborated further on her understanding of Irigaray. Here she observes that Irigaray 'in identifying the feminine' produces 'this identity which "is" the non-identical' (Butler, 1993: 48). The suggestion that there could be an entity that 'is' the non-identical means a fetishization of non-identity. Butler seems to accept this element of fetishism as an inevitable ingredient of 'strategic' essentialism. Furthermore, she opens the argumentative back-door that Irigaray might perhaps not mean everything she writes quite literally: Butler observes that 'her terms tend to mime the grandiosity of the philosophical errors that she underscores'. It seems that Irigaray ironically 'insinuated herself into the voice of the father' (ibid.: 36).

20 'According to [the] Foucauldian model of emancipatory sexual politics, the overthrow of "sex" results in the release of a primary sexual multiplicity, a notion not so far afield from the psychoanalytic postulation of primary polymorphousness or Marcuse's notion of an original and creative Eros subsequently repressed by an instrumentalist culture' (Butler, 1990: 96).

21 Wittig is best known as a novelist; her extremely inspiring theoretical writings are collected in *The Straight Mind* (1992).

22 For a classic discussion of the concept of 'critical theory' in this sense see Horkheimer (1972[1937]); for the most thorough recent discussion see Postone (1996). If the concept of 'power' generically refers to any order or set of rules of social relations, then the statement that there is no society 'outside power' is a tautology. If 'power' is meant to imply exploitation and domination, it is a different question.

  Likewise, it is undeniable that use of language is and will be a feature of every human society, and that the given-ness of any specific language posits some form of boundary on what can be thought and done in that society (a staple of European thinking at least since early Romanticism), but this does not quite approximate to the belief in the existence of a transhistorical 'the law'; whether or not one finds a society 'without laws' conceivable, it is for the time being enough to assert that we could create one with very different laws.

23 Butler alludes to this link in the preface to *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990: vii).

24 Butler points out (1987a: 92) that both of the main interpreters of Hegel in France whom she discusses, Kojève and Hyppolite, accept the (Hegelian) formulation 'that human beings are what they are not and are not what they are'. Likewise, Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*: 'We have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is' (ibid.: 93). Butler alluded to this in an interview: 'I guess this is my Hegelianism: one is defined as much by what one is not as by the position that one explicitly inhabits' (Butler in Osborne and Segal, 1994: 35).

25 For Sartre, this implies 'the impossibility of realizing the imaginary in the real world'. When the imaginary cannot be realized in the real world, one has to turn towards unreal worlds in order to realize desire, i.e. in order 'to be human'. In Sartre's writing, the creation of imaginary worlds happens

first of all through literary works. Although Butler in *Gender Trouble* talks about the stage of *everyday life*, not that of literature, the Sartrean backcloth might perhaps explain the frequent adoption of theatrical metaphors for the realization of the imaginary, and the widespread (mis-) understanding of Butler's notion of 'gender performance' as an arbitrary costume drama.

26 Hull argues that Butler's discussion of the 'girling' of a newborn baby (in Butler, 1993) and in particular the brutal force of the '*It is a girl!*' can be related to the painful affirmation intrinsic to what Adorno addressed as 'identity thinking' (Hull, 1997: 24). The 'girling' of the baby involves 'reading' the genitalia. The concepts 'girl' and 'boy' are 'connected to all the things it means to be a boy or a girl' in a particular society. All these 'things' – actually: social relations – are present in the speech-act of girling and give it material force. However, the material effects of identity-thinking notwithstanding, there is still a potential of *resistance* in the *non-identity* of the object: the girl *is* not a girl, really. It is a being neither identical to the concept 'girl' nor to any other being that would 'fall under' the category of 'girl'.

27 If dialectics acknowledges that 'the only way out of the dialectical context of immanence is by that context itself', it will be a 'critical reflection upon that context. It reflects its own motion. . . . Such dialectics is negative' (Adorno, 1990: 141).

28 Adorno complements this specific argument with a more general one: *all* thinking in concepts is identifying and subsumes the manifold to a limited number of concepts. 'All philosophy, even that which intends freedom, carries in its inevitably general elements unfreedom which extends the unfreedom of society' (Adorno, 1990: 58).

29 In her *Adorno Lectures* from 2002 on the 'critique of the violence of ethics' (*Kritik der ethischen Gewalt*) Butler returned to her discussion of ethics in *Subjects of Desire* as well as to the more general 1980s debate on the relationship between Foucault and the 'Frankfurt School'. However, she most conspicuously failed to develop one category that is especially central to Adorno's writing: the concept of *society*.

30 Ironically, this is a case of language governing those who use it, a characteristic of *some* aspects of language that has been over-exaggerated by some structuralists.

31 'Society' can admittedly be used as if it was an extra-historical category, too, but this seems much more extravagant and is easier to detect.

32 Perhaps the second most important issue is the need to distinguish two concepts of necessity: *trans*-historical necessities such as the universally human need for engaging in interchange with nature, and historically *specific* necessities dictated by the needs of a particular social formation such as the capitalist mode of production (Postone, 1996: 381; also Adorno, 1990: 219ff.). This distinction implies that the overcoming of the capitalist form of modernity would imply getting rid of the specific (as it were, the unnecessary and self-imposed) necessities and the chance to handle rationally – i.e. to minimize – the unavoidable ones. An analogous argument about sex/gender would be that, although procreation will have to be an

aspect of any human society, the identitarian compulsion that there be *men and women* will not. (I presuppose here the argument implicit in Wittig's [1992], Guillaumin's [1995] and Laqueur's [1992] arguments that 'men and women' as we know them are modern inventions in the same way as 'race' and 'nation' in their modern meanings.) Human freedom includes recognition of the material and bodily 'boundedness of humanity as a mediate part of nature' (Postone, 1996: 381). This position is opposed both to idealist day-dreamings of transcendence of nature and the bodily side of being, and also to its simple inversion, the longing for harmony with (material) nature.

33 Cf. Allen's observation that 'readers of *Gender Trouble* are left with the paradoxical feeling that resistance is either completely impossible or too easy' (Allen, 1998: 461).

34 The immanence of criticism to the society it opposes has already been recognized by Horkheimer as the defining characteristic of critical theory; see his essay from 1937, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (Horkheimer, 1972).

PSC

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