

A Fractious Constellation

Interview with Judith Butler by Nina Schulz, Hamburg, May 2007

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In Your lecture, You were emphasising the need to question our „spatial and temporal presuppositions of some of our progressive narratives.“ If this is an urgent task, what does it entail exactly for You?

I think that we need to be careful about thinking about forms of secular modernity as more advanced or more adult positions. These views tend to correlate with views of Islam or other religious traditions as primitive or less developed. These narratives serve a certain notion of cultural imperialism, to be sure, but they also keep us from understanding the ways in which multiple kinds of histories coexist and intersect. It seems to me if our „modernity“ is to have any meaning at all, it will have to be conceived as a constellation of convergent and conflicting temporalities. The point is not to demand an assimilation to certain secular norms, but to contextualize the history of secularism in its specificity, and to consider what kinds of cultural translations are needed to effect cultural and political negotiations during this time.

For You those scenes of torture in Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo are: an effect, an instrument and the most graphic and coercive expression of the civilizational mission. Do You regard it as a new form of barbarism or is it a continuation of white colonization with different means?

I am sure that there are links between, for instance, lynching of Black men in the south of the US (as well as the photographic capture of those lynchings) and the kinds of photographs we saw of torture in Abu Ghraib. And though both scenes clearly are racialized, and seek to establish racialized meanings, I am not sure that white supremacy can explain them both equally well. It seems to me that the US is trying to establish cultural hegemony through its torture, and this involves an anti-islamic practice that is partially based on racialized thought, but also on views about primitive and barbaric religions. US secular ideology requires that Christianity function as the unspoken basis of secularism. So this is a different problem, one that intersects with racialization, but is not reducible to it.

It is „the specific culture of the army“, where You locate the rituals of torture. But don't they need to be situated within larger socio-political developments, i.e. most of the torturers in Abu-Ghraib were contractors of so-called Private Military Firms. A series like 24 with Kiefer Sutherland resorts to torture as a legitimate form of gaining further intelligence from „enemy combattants“. Terms such as water boarding, stress positions, professional interrogation techniques and alternative set of procedures function as euphemisms for practices of torture. What kind of socio-political processes and actors seem to have made torture more acceptable in society today?

You are surely right that the practices of torture cannot be understood adequately solely through reference to the culture of the army. But my response would be: the culture of the US army draws upon larger cultural and political forces. It includes enormous misogyny and homophobia, nationalism, cultural prejudice and cultural supremacy, and a general valorization of force as the means by which something called “democracy” is to be “spread.” I am not sure what it means to “spread” democracy, but it is clearly closer to “imposing” a certain political order than establishing the conditions for democratic rule. In any case, I think that torture has become more acceptable because the “enemy” is not considered part of the sphere of the human. The “enemy” – conceived as radical islam, in large part – is considered a threat to humanity itself. We tend to think that certain forms of state violence (and torture in US prisons is a form of

state violence) are legitimate violence, but that insurgent attacks on occupying armies are not. Why do we make these distinctions? And what would it be like to consider various tactics of violence as they function in politically specific settings. We may want to oppose violence, but to do so effectively, we need to be able to distinguish its forms.

You link the notions of progress to a secular understanding of politics and history. Again those are based on an idea of freedom, which is seen to progress throughout time. But if the alleged defense of liberal rights becomes bound up with state coercion and specific socio-political forms of abjection such as restrictive migration politics and if certain conceptions of freedom are mobilized as instruments for practices of coercion and bigotry, this raises specific challenges for a progressive sexual politics.

I do not think all forms of progress are linked to secular understandings, and I'm clearly not „opposed“ to all secular understandings of politics and history. What concerns me is the particular nexus between „claims of progress“ in relation to sexual norms and the denigration or persecution of religious minorities. My sense is that any radical sexual politics needs to oppose racism and the persecution of minorities, whether they be sexual minorities or some other. We need to reclaim conceptions of freedom that oppose state coercions on a number of issues. My sense is that a different kind of politics can emerge if it is based on a critique of coercive state power, especially as it seeks to divide minorities against one another, and to instrumentalize sexual progress as a way of shoring up civilizational norms that justify the war on Islam.

In the face of these developments, You suggest to „establish a politics that opposes state coercion and violence“. How would You outline acts of resistance to the civilizational mission?

My sense is that the concept of „civilization“ needs to be opposed through a theory and practice of cultural translation. There are no distinct „civilizations“ in the way that Bernard Lewis or Samuel Huntington have maintained. I believe that Talal Asad has made this argument in cogent terms. Similarly, I don't think it will do to consider „cultures“ as distinct entities, since they make no sense without understanding their points of contact and differentiation. My view is that we have to start with the conditions of contact, to understand „torture“ itself as one version of contact, and to promote modes of cultural translation that do not reduce to cultural imperialism.

„A fractious constellation“ is a figure You suggest to use to define the current time(s) of sexual politics. What kind of potential does such a figure of antagonisms, fractions and contentions harbour for sexual politics?

In the first instance, it keeps the field open and alive. And there is much to be said in favor of that. We cannot accept the idea that sexual politics is best served through a culture and politics of hatred. There are profound divisions within the sexual left on what the primary norms of the movement should be. Some argue for freedom, other for rights, and yet others for recognition or equality. What is meant by each of these terms is contested. This contestation is a sign of a democratic process, one in which unanimity and consensus are not the highest goals.

What would a „dislocation from our provincial universalities“ entail in Your opinion?

It would mean, first of all, imagining ourselves as others imagine us. We often think that the problem is coming to know and appreciate „the other“, but this installs us in the position of epistemological privilege. How are we seen? And how are our actions taken up? How are they responded to? To what ends have our secular and democratic values been put, and what would it mean to dislocate ourselves from our position of presumptive superiority? I am not saying that there should be no universal discourse,

but I am opposed to those forms of universalism that simply ratify local cultures as if they were – or should be – shared by everyone.

You suggest to „recast sexual politics within a global frame.“ Do You already detect examples of queer-feminist groups who are taking on this challenge?

Yes, of course. I think that there is a queer engagement with the anti-globalization movement, and i think that there are several queer engagements with colonial and postcolonial critique. I think that transnational queerness is also concerned with a critical understanding of how established national borders constrain the way we think. There is also a queer engagement with issues of „precarity“ – I think all of these are crucial.

If You would march in the queer-feminist block on an international demonstration e.g. against the G8, what kind of slogan would You decorate Your banner with?

Oh, I am not sure I would have my own banner. I would probably march in the interstices between groups, hoping to make some kind of link.

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