

## BOOK REVIEW

**Judith Butler** 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*  
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While Judith Butler is best known for her critical interventions into feminist debates on gender, sexuality and feminist politics, her focus in recent years has broadened to encompass philosophical and political reflections on the so-called 'war on terror'. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, which is also her most recent book publication, further underpins this current thematic emphasis. The book consists of five essays and an extended introduction, all of which grapple with the precariousness of human life and its susceptibility to violence, and with the possibility of articulating ethical responses to violence under conditions of war. The contributions to the book, written between 2004 and 2008, include reflections on bodily vulnerability and torture, on the state of multiculturalism in late modern capitalist societies and its relationship to progressive sexual politics, and on those narratives of civilisation that frame our responses to contemporary political conditions. What makes this book so compelling is Butler's effort to intertwine her philosophical reflections on the vulnerability of life with her discussion of the political ramifications emerging out of the recent wars of the West.

Many of the arguments and themes presented in the book will be familiar to her readers: they have been articulated, in modified

versions, in previous writings, including *Undoing Gender*, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, and *Giving an Account of Oneself*. What this book adds to these texts is Butler's deployment of the notion of the frame. Frames, as Butler avers, are interpretative structures that regulate recognition, including the recognition of life and loss; frames categorise the norms that govern the structures of recognition, they mould those lives that are recognised as liveable, and hence grievable, and they order our affective responses to others. While I am broadly sympathetic towards Butler's deployment of the notion of the frame and its connection with her account of recognition, I would have preferred a more thorough unpacking and assessment of this concept. This criticism also relates to my assessment of the book as a whole. *Frames of War* offers a dense philosophical discussion that has become the hallmark of Butler's work, but would have benefitted from a more detailed exposition of its key themes and ideas. This includes her discussion of the frame, whose main reference points, including Derrida and Goffman, are relegated to a footnote, and which leave the reader with a series of unanswered questions. These include, in particular, the relationship between frames and norms, as well as the social and historical conditions of the emergence of frames. I suspect that her approach may not convince all of her critics, some of whom have challenged her previous work for its alleged theoretical incoherence and eclecticism. However, I must confess that there is also something utterly compelling and attractive about Butler's persistent adherence to an 'unfaithful reading' of her sources.

The introductory essay, entitled 'Precarious Life, Grievable Life', could profitably be read as a sequel to her book *Precarious Life*. In fact, the notion of life is a guiding thread of this chapter (and of *Frames of War* overall), which Butler seeks to rescue for progressive, Leftist politics. She declares the question of life to be an ontological one, albeit one that is embedded in the conditions of the social. This social ontology of life establishes which lives are liveable, recognisable and, in the final instance, grievable. The argument that unfolds in this chapter mirrors an older contention, on melancholia, which invokes a double 'never-never' that is grounded in the melancholic disavowal of same-sex attachment on the basis of a 'never-loved-never-lost'. This idea appears in a new shape in the 'never-never' of *Frames of War*; now she focuses on the precarity of lives that have never lived, because they

were not recognised, and can therefore not be considered as lost. Key to her discussion is a distinction she makes between precariousness, defined as our existential vulnerability and dependency on others, and precarity, which is the socially and politically instituted differential of vulnerability. Yet, this distinction produces something of a dilemma: when, where and how does our ontological vulnerability become social? Which elements of our lives are, ontologically, precarious, and which are subject to a contingent, thus social, precarity? Butler's deployment of ontological categories, and their relationship to the social and historical conditions of life have previously been challenged and I remain to be convinced that her invocation of a social ontology will satisfy these critics.

As I intimated, Butler connects her discussion of recognition with the notion of the frame, specifically with the modes of recognition bestowed by frames. At the heart of her account of recognition sits the body and its exposure to vulnerability. However, while she posits vulnerability as a constitutive feature of life, which stresses the subject's dependency upon others, it also underpins the susceptibility to the violent acts imposed upon the subject. This point is further taken up in the first chapter, on 'Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect', where Butler ponders the generalised precariousness and dependency of human life to the actions of others. Key to Butler's thesis is her postulation of an ethical responsibility towards others, which she grounds in our fundamental dependency for our own survival. This intersubjective account of the subject, based upon the condition of shared precariousness, builds upon her assertion of the (social) ontology of bodily vulnerability discussed in the introductory chapter. We are most visibly and most intimately exposed to others in our bodily beings. Such an ontological condition makes the practice of torture particularly insidious because, as Butler avers, torture exploits the exposure of our bodies to violence. And yet, we cannot escape this corporeal openness and precariousness and are thus condemned to suffer the 'risk of sociality' (p. 61). It is because of this paradoxical nature of bodily vulnerability and life that Butler denounces any effort to shore up one's borders, whether the morphological boundaries of the body or the borders of the nation. Such claims to invincibility and sovereignty contain within them the possibility of violence, war and torture, which, as Butler suggests, become a logical extension of the claim to sovereignty: it is the attempt to assert one's own sovereignty while

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breaking the sovereignty of the other. Hence, the West's intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the abuses associated with Abu Ghraib, and the practice of indefinite detention at Guantánamo are deeply problematic, not just on moral grounds (with which Butler is not comfortable), but because they produce an ultimately futile appearance of sovereignty that prevents a careful reflection on vulnerability and that forecloses ethical responses to violence.

An intriguing aspect of this chapter, which runs through the book as a whole, is Butler's invocation of the importance of affect. Affect is called upon to account for our differentiated responses to different forms of life. Referring to Talal Asad's *On Suicide Bombing*, Butler asks why we are so repulsed at the act of suicide bombing and other non-state acts of violence, yet do not respond with the same horror to the dispensation of state-directed or legitimised violence. Her answer to this question lies in the way that our affective responses to different lives are framed, resulting in a distinction between liveable, and hence grievable, lives, and those lives that are not considered fully grievable and hence not fully recognised as human. Affects are thus fully social, a claim that stresses our relation to others as much as it underpins the implication of affects in the normative power of the frame. However, we do not suffer our affects in a deterministic fashion; rather, as she insists, affects can be channelled and utilised in the service of a politics of outrage (p. 40). Curiously though, even though affect plays a central role in her overall discussion, much more could have been said here. A more detailed consideration of the conditions of their emergence, and of the context and conditions of our affective responses would have been beneficial. I also wonder whether a closer engagement with vitalism (which is also relegated to a footnote), specifically with affect's relationship to the body, and with the psycho-analytic theory of the drives (which she rejects) would have added to Butler's argument here.

A more careful consideration of affect would also be of interest to Butler's discussion of non-violence and, more broadly, the question of the possibility of ethical life, which she addresses in the final chapter of the book. She returns to several questions explored at the beginning of the book, namely, our fundamental dependency upon others and its implications in violence. Published, in different form, in the journal *differences* as a response to two of her critics, the philosophers Catherine Mills and Fiona Jenkins, Butler concurs with Mills

that violence is constitutive to the formation of the subject, 'at least partially' (p. 167), and is embodied in the very norms that come to form us as intelligible and recognisable subjects. However, as Butler further expounds, such a foundational or constitutive violence poses an ethical dilemma: how do we live the violence that forms us, while seeking to induce a 'crucial breakage' (p. 167) between this formative violence and the possibility of non-violent conduct? While she strongly rejects non-violence as a moral principle, outside and beyond any form of social ontology, she embarks upon two suggestions. The first is her invocation of ethics as the assumption of one's responsibility, a theme that surfaces increasingly in Butler's most recent work, while the second invokes practices of iterability that displace and resignify the violence of norms.

The visual production of affect and representation of precarious life occupies Butler in the second chapter, on 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag', where she ponders upon Susan Sontag's reflections on photography's role in political conflict. What, then, do we see when we view a photograph? What kind of narrative and interpretation does the photograph offer its viewers? And how, and to what extent, does the photographic documentation of suffering make us affectively and ethically responsive to the images portrayed? Although broadly sympathetic towards Sontag's portrayal of the photographic image, Butler insists, *contra* Sontag, on the affective power of the image. She argues that the field of perceptible reality frames our response to the suffering of others because norms and frames shape our recognition of grievable life. As I already suggested, central to Butler's discussion is the notion of bodily vulnerability and its most insidious abuse through the practice of torture. Photography plays a key function in this context: as Butler avers, the photographs of Abu Ghraib enact a conception of the Muslim victims of abuse and violence that denies them recognition as fully human. This is because the photos can be read as a dissemination of the notion of a Western, masculine and sovereign subject, set against a sodomised, and feminised, version of the Muslim. While real violence, abuse and threats of shaming are central to the generation of the images, they also frame our notion of normative humanity and human bodily morphology (p. 94); hence, the question as to who counts as human is as integral to the photographs of Abu Ghraib as it is to her wider philosophical discussion. However, even though the

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frame constitutes the parameter of our interpretation, indeed of our affective and ethical responses, for example by selecting what is included and excluded in the image, we are not condemned to respond, in deterministic fashion, to those structures presented to us. Invoking some of her earlier work on subversive iterability and contestability, that is, the capacity to repeat norms in unintended and subversive ways that lead to a resignification of norms, Butler insists on the capacity of the viewer to contest the norms, and with them the frame, that is represented to them. This insistence on resignification allows for different and competing interpretations and framings of these images.

The time and space of sexual politics, and its relationship to multiculturalism, is the focus of the next two chapters. Chapter three, on 'Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time' is a modified version of an article published in the *British Journal of Sociology*, which in turn draws on a keynote address given at the London School of Economics in 2007, while the fourth chapter maps her responses to several of her interlocutors (it is also included in the *British Journal of Sociology*). In her essay, Butler explores the possibility of a plural version of time, set against notions of unilinear time that seeks to establish the cultural hegemony of modernity as the embodiment of Western civilisation. Readers who remain curious about Butler's views on questions of gender and sexuality will find in this essay her recent effort to respond to the seemingly intractable dilemma of how to reconcile the demands of progressive sexual politics with the cultural practices of minority communities, specifically those identified as Muslim. The problem whether the demands of sexual politics and of minority communities are diametrically opposed has indeed occupied many feminist concerns in recent years; Butler's response however circumvents the question whether, to borrow from Susan Moller Okin, multiculturalism is bad for women. Rather, Butler disputes the very framing of the question as an attempt to engage in hegemonic constructions of the subject. This is indeed a key challenge to feminist scholarship, including recent feminist work on intersectionality. Such a framing, as Butler illustrates, occurs in different contexts, whether in French conceptions of *laïcité*, the Catholic Church's attempts at naturalising categories of gender, or state configurations of citizenship. Butler's reference to the Dutch example is particularly insightful: she retells an alleged practice of Dutch im-

migration officials, who show a photograph of two men kissing, to prospective candidates for Dutch citizenship. The viewers' responses to this image are said to reveal their subscription to a Western, that is, modern viewpoint or a pre-modern, that is, Islamic, viewpoint that is interpreted as being at odds with modern views on sexuality and freedom. What Butler demonstrates, very starkly, is how notions of the secular are implicated in narratives that construct hierarchical conceptions of otherness. Possibly one of the most pertinent discussions in the whole book, aside from her explorations of torture in Chapter 2, is her critique of a narrative of civilisation and modernity that is intrinsically implicated in the exercise of violence and torture of orientalised others. In fact, Butler goes so far as to suggest that torture is 'a technique of modernization' (p. 130), deployed 'to construct a subject that would break down when coercively forced to break [the sexual and moral codes of Islam]' (p. 128). It is here that sexual politics and culture intersect: the Western civilising mission, Butler suggests, is contingent upon a narrative of sexual freedom that constructs Islam as at odds with such freedom. However, as she continues, Western sexual freedom, which is intrinsic to the construction of the Arab subject as pre-modern, is one of homophobia and misogyny, embodied most visibly in the sexualised sadistic practices of Abu Ghraib. Butler's discussion is as much an important contribution to ongoing debates on multiculturalism and immigration, as it is a telling criticism of those feminist attempts that have allied themselves to conservative positions that seek to push back progressive sexual and feminist politics in the West.

Whether Butler's influence in the wider field of social and political theory will match her importance in feminist theory remains to be seen. Judging by the continued output of work on Butler it is fair to say that the scholarly interest in her writings is not diminishing; not least because she successfully continues to stimulate her readers with her ideas. Thus, even though her recent texts have not escaped criticism, and despite my own reservations regarding some aspects of her analysis, I can state categorically that this book does not disappoint; it is a thought-provoking political and philosophical analysis of our current political condition. One of its major strengths lies in Butler's courageous effort to engage philosophically with pressing political issues of our time. In this respect, she is faithful to Walter Benjamin, a thinker who surfaces increasingly in her writings: like Benjamin,

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Butler urges us to 'reach for the brake' (p. 184), to allow for a time of reflection and to re-assert the value of critique. It is because of this that she remains one of the most important social critics and philosophers of our time.