



## Vulnerability, violence and (cosmopolitan) ethics: Butler's *Precarious Life*\*

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### Abstract

This article proposes that Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* provides a valuable contribution to the sociology of cosmopolitanism on the basis of a perspective which forcefully addresses the new sovereign power of the USA which reneges on the possibilities of cosmopolitanization by means of resurgent nationalism, extra-legal modalities of militarization and incarceration ('the new war prison') and state powers now integrated into normalized practices of everyday governmentality. Butler's Foucauldian approach to power and subjectivity is contrasted with Beck's understanding of self-reflexivity in cosmopolitanized society. Butler's feminist-inspired approach to mourning and grief and her account of vulnerability and violence also encourage a response to recent acts of terrorism and subsequent wars by means of an ethics of non-violence. Drawing on the Levinasian concept of 'the face' Butler explores the obligation posed by 'the face' to refuse violent confrontation. The article suggests a sociological reading of Butler's ethical account which throws light on issues pertinent to the cosmopolitanization thesis, through an interrogation of the relations of power and powerlessness which underlie encounters with otherness.

**Keywords:** Judith Butler; violence; vulnerability; ethical perspective; new war prison; sovereignty; governmentality; Ulrich Beck; cosmopolitanization thesis

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### The paradoxical hopelessness of critique

This article pursues a somewhat aberrant, or perhaps experimental pathway, in a volume otherwise given over to engaging much more directly with the new sociology of cosmopolitanization. Against the grain of the prescribed and over-arching topic, I consider what cosmopolitan sociology might have to gain from the ethics of non-violence, the reflections on bodily vulnerability and

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mourning, and the critique of sovereign power which are Judith Butler's key concerns in her recent short book *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004a). It would be wrong to try to force these very different perspectives together, as though they might, conveniently, find themselves to be sociological bedfellows. Indeed it may well be that Butler's account of contemporary violence, can best be read as implicitly calling elements of Beck's vision to account, urging caution and requesting that sociology in general might focus more directly on the escalation of violence within the contemporary world. If this is the case then the value of Butler's work might lie in its providing a quite different vocabulary for responding to some of those key political events which Beck has considered within the frame of his own 'cosmopolitan manifesto' (Beck 2006). Butler's recent writing certainly offers a different account of the present from that found in Beck's 'carefully optimistic theorising' (Adams 2004). She posits instead an analysis where, without stating this directly, hopefulness can perhaps emerge, through the performative force of critique, indeed is embedded in the paradoxical hopelessness of critique, in that, in her case, this critique gestures towards an ethics of acting otherwise in the face of violence.

At the same time, the multiplicity of forces that hinder the possibility of a truly cosmopolitan ethics and politics, are at the heart of Butler's sorrowful reflections. *Precarious Life* provides then, an opportunity, first, to examine how one of the world's leading feminist philosophers confronts many of the same issues engaged with by one of the most well-known living sociologists. And second, to consider, not so much the limits of the cosmopolitan perspective as envisaged by Beck, as the ways and means by which this sociology of the 'second modernity' finds itself confronted, here, by an analysis which demonstrates the powerful forces that de-rail the possibilities for future cosmopolitanization in the sense that Beck might advocate. Being made mindful of such forces, is, I would argue, surely important in relation to our understanding of what the cosmopolitan project still must grapple with. This implies that Beck is less attentive to the wide range of forces whose seeking-out of world hegemony on the basis of a far-reaching, radically re-defined, and strongly neo-liberalized version, of contemporary democracy, have consequences which will see a proliferation rather than a minimization of violence. But this is not to devalue his persuasive analysis of global political processes which, in his view incorporate, as one strand among others, Western-style economic neo-liberalism. Despite these more obvious differences, both Beck and Butler share many concerns in common, not least the recognition of the need for a better understanding of social and political transformation carried out from a perspective which breaks with what Beck calls 'methodological nationalism'. It is possible to construe Butler as providing a post-structuralist, or (de-constructivist) sociological voice, one which scrutinizes the motives of disciplinary power, and questions the (nation-based) foundations upon which disciplinary endeavours are pursued, thus opening a pathway to modes of

inter-disciplinary inquiry, such that philosophy, sociology, literary theory and cultural studies might find ways of engaging more fluently with each other. Beck's voice in contrast espouses a more fully intact and professionalized sociology, which finds itself, thanks to his important contribution, now understood as a new second millenium sociology.

My argument in the pages that follow is that the distinctiveness of Butler's writing in this context is that she insists on the importance of asking 'impossible' questions. In so doing, she productively illuminates some of the normative (or orderly), and prescriptive, underpinnings of sociological discourse such as Beck's. She also, like Derrida, and like writers such as Gilroy and Agamben, occupies a position in her writing which permits an unremitting dissection of the various mobilizations of power that have tragic repercussions for those who are unequivocally outside the frames of contemporary, global, modalities of social inclusion, and yet whose 'bare life' status also defines the terms within which political culture is currently conducted (Gilroy 2004; Agamben 2005). And while others have called upon her to consider the political possibilities which can accrue from inhabiting the corridors of power (of state, of public policy) on the basis of attempting a re-territorialization of the presiding norms of the state, this, it seems, is not consonant with her intellectual pathway (Lloyd 2005). While a stance of refusal can easily lead to (leftist) romanticism, Butler instead, and more evidently in her Levinas-influenced recent work, inhabits an ethical speaking position which invokes the power of language to reflect with humility on the suffering of others, on weakness and vulnerability.

What then, are these mutual concerns that Ulrich Beck and Judith Butler might be said to share? Surprisingly in the light of the above comments, these are numerous. For instance, the dangers of new nationalisms, the instrumentalization of human rights and the subordination of judicial procedure and international law, which in Beck's account comprise 'imperialist abuse of the cosmopolitan mission', under the auspices of the 'military humanism of the West' (Beck 2000: 86–7). And although Beck's notion of epochal change, from first to second modernity, would seem to refute Butler's insistence on the revitalization of archaic modes of sovereignty as traces within the more current practices of governmentality, there is, nevertheless, a sharp sense in Butler's writing, of this moment in the history of power being none the less something of a turning point. (To draw on a Gramsci, we might say that this moment marks a new political conjuncture in the global field). Both authors understand there to be, in recent years, a quite profound de-stabilizing of First World privileges, giving rise to aggressive action on the part of Western governments which in turn suggests a new moment in post-Cold War democratic life. Both authors are aware of the contagious mobilization of a vocabulary of fear (or risk) as a political instrument, and the effect of foreclosure that this can so easily achieve. Butler and Beck alike reflect on social and ethical

responsibilities so that the encounter with strangers might become solidaristic rather than fearful and antagonistic. Each of these authors also offers a critique of the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources globally, and the need for new political structures which redress these and other injustices. If Butler confronts the neo-nationalist aggrandizement of US expansionism, Beck argues for European expansionism as something of counter-model on the basis of European propensity for self-critique.

Both Butler and Beck are extremely aware too, of the strategic and selective role of public memory in nation-building and the hierarchies of value which prevail within both state and non-state formations which withhold recognition to certain social groups or persons so that their very status as human beings becomes questionable and their histories immemorable. Beck urges that there come into being stronger and effective transnational political organizations with regulative powers (e.g. the expanded Europe) in the light of neo-liberal advocates for the decline of state and the subsequent dangers of militarization and new and unresolved conflict. Butler pinpoints the re-configuration of state powers, as sovereignty is smuggled into and incorporated within the more widely dispersed administrative functions of US governmentality. Both writers wish to be able to imagine post-nationalist solidaristic political communities, with Beck urging this coming about through a process of cosmopolitanization, a learning process, a practice of reflexivity based on awareness of inter-dependence which would find institutional expression, with of course the media playing a key role. These lifeworld aspects of cosmopolitanization would provide a counter to neo-nationalisms and the resurgence of xenophobia, by means of a discourse of hospitality and openness. There are Habermasian undercurrents here of an orderly cosmopolitan public sphere comprised of encounters between mutually respectful strangers. Butler, in contrast, draws on a Levinasian vocabulary to examine what is entailed when the other who has been deprived status as a human prevails upon us, makes an ethical demand of us, which we cannot refuse. That we do normatively refuse such demands (although in refusing them we are also responding to them) is not unconnected with the power of the media to shape and manage such encounters, rendering responsiveness on the part of the privileged citizens of the West largely a matter of disavowal, and also, in recent times, intervening decisively in the realms of what can be seen and what can be said. Both writers are concerned with the power of the global media, although neither engages at length on how they perceive the power relations encoded in these multi-national conglomerates as actually functioning. Butler, much more than Beck, draws on imagery and fragments of public political discourse made available through mass media forms, indeed these are among the key sources for her analysis. However the detail and sustained attentiveness to media, in relation to questions of the mobilization of consent for embarking on war, and subsequent military endeavours, is not developed.

Each writer also has reason to consider Jewishness, for Beck as it was previously denigrated within the slur of cosmopolitanism, for Butler as the slur of anti-semitism is currently used as a threat to quell discussion about Israel and its treatment of Palestinian people. Butler pursues a much more directly political engagement with the current situation in Israel than does Beck. He is indeed aware of the complexities and ambivalences manifest in his attribution of cosmopolitan values to Israeli society, in terms of the clear limits of this self-reflexive 'cosmopolitan' capacity in relation to racial, cultural and religious conflicts. Butler seeks to develop through her engagement with Levinas, a Jewish ethics of non-violence which might eventually bring an end to Palestinian suffering and create a post-Zionist politics in Israel on the basis of a two state scenario ('I am, for instance, in favour of Palestinian self-determination, and even Palestinian statehood' (Butler 2004a: 99).) While this possibility itself also has its critics, within and beyond the ranks of the Jewish and non-Jewish left and liberals, it would, I think, be amiss of me here to omit as relevant to this consideration, the positions of both writers, historically, in relation to Jewishness and Israeli politics. For Beck there is inevitably the long shadow of Nazism and the consequences this has had for a post-Holocaust generation of German radical and liberal scholars alike, to stake out a more critical stance, for Butler there is her own acknowledged Jewishness and her deep familiarity with Jewish philosophy. And in a situation in the US academy, where to engage critically with US support for Israel is to put oneself in some position of vulnerability, if not danger, we might suggest that Butler here is (not cynically, indeed passionately) utilizing a strategy which permits the possibility of critical intervention, on the basis of this religious affiliation. More generally Butler anticipates the possibility of a cosmopolitan ethics herself, without actually naming them as such. She has already publicly described her debt to Derrida and in *Precarious Life* it is possible to discern the trace of his thinking, including some of his comments on cosmopolitan politics, on the idea of the 'city of refuge' and on 'forms of solidarity yet to be invented' which are set against a context which sees the decline of state accountability and the escalation of violence (Butler 2004b; Derrida 1997). If Beck expounds a full-blown thesis of cosmopolitanization, we could argue that Butler proposes an ethics which might be understood as extending further the 'cosmopolitics' outlined by Derrida.

Having established this terrain of common interest, I should emphasize that I am not proposing a kind of grand sociological comparison. Nor is it my intention to summarize elements of cosmopolitan social theory, as a basis for the discussion which follows. Other contributors to the volume have already done this in depth, or else they have provided a critical engagement with the cosmopolitan thesis by means of reflecting on current empirical research conducted within, or in proximity with, its conceptual frames. Thus, admittedly I leave behind these ongoing considerations, and, perversely perhaps, I persevere here

with an engagement with elements in Butler's recent thinking which examine aspects of contemporary US power that renege on cosmopolitanization as a progressive force, and which seek to undo what Gilroy calls the 'convivial' forms of everyday multi-culturalism, and what Beck describes as 'banal cosmopolitanism' (Gilroy 2004). Indeed the diverse styles of self-reflexivity emerging from the cosmopolitan encounter with others, which Beck envisages, might now be counter-posed against the folksy homilies of retrenchment as uttered by Rumsfeld and Bush. And while the attack on the USA might explain this rapid retreat from sustained self-reflexivity, surely the very point of posing the cosmopolitan encounter as sociologically important, is that it marks out the space for testing, to the absolute limits, one's own cultural values. For Butler the US response in such situations of tragedy and grief as those of 9/11 has been to embrace a resurgent nationalism, and to at least partly disavow international law, international alliances, treaties and partnerships which have been in place in the last 50 years, in favour of a position of distrust for those not willing immediately to comply with the American request to situate oneself as either a friend or foe. At the very least this request undermines the ('old') European style of liberal democratic deliberation which Beck takes as his starting point. Thus Butler dissects contemporary American (military and political) power, its impact beyond the nation-state, and she examines the dark underside of social and political change, drawing on both a feminist psycho-analytical and an ethical framework to reflect on political subject-hood under fearful circumstances such as those which came into being in the aftermath of the attacks on the USA in September 2001.

However with its vocabulary of mourning, vulnerability and ethical obligation to the other, hers is not a conventionally leftist critique. In *Precarious Life*, she takes issue with some of those variants of leftism which emerged in post 9/11 writing, and her embrace of Jewish religious ethics also marks out some distance from mainstream, secular left politics. Indeed it is worth pondering, for a moment, Butler's position in regard to that entity known in common parlance as the left.<sup>1</sup> She refers to the left on several occasions, but, she is rather opaque on who actually constitutes this presumably diverse grouping. This might well be due to the fragmentation or decimation of the American left in recent years. It may be that in the aftermath of 9/11, there was a further bifurcation, so that some on the left rallied to the just-war platform, of which Butler is highly critical, leaving others to endorse a hackneyed vocabulary whereby American imperialism, over the years might eventually be expected to give rise to such acts of aggression. And Butler is also critical of this position. However surely neither of these responses exhausts the possibilities of leftist politics even in circumstances as circumscribed as these? And, in addition, if this scenario does indeed account for the left one wonders to whom the analysis presented in *Precarious Life* might possibly be directed towards. Of course it need not be, perhaps ought not to be, directed in any

such way. But still, this openness of address might suggest something of a re-focus. There seems to be here, a more explicit engagement with religious politics, and Butler in this instance does not seek to spell out how these may or may not connect with her previous work on the possibilities of radical democracy. It may well be that this ethical dimension offers opportunities to speak effectively to a wider milieu, and beyond the 'usual suspects'.

As a sociologist Beck's writing has not been associated with leftist politics, instead his risk society work has been seen as providing a quite different analysis from those many sociological accounts of contemporary capitalism influenced by Marxist, or neo-Marxist thought. In addition along with Anthony Giddens, he has been recognized as one of the architects of 'third way' or 'neue mitte' (beyond left and right) politics, which have had currency in the UK under the Blair government, and to an extent in Germany. There is a sense, implicitly, in both Butler and Beck (although with quite different inflections) that left-wing thought can mark out a space of unfortunate, if well-intended, dogmatism and orthodoxy. It is perhaps predictable that someone like myself, associated with what has come to be known as British cultural studies, would make the point that there is indeed a long established non-dogmatic leftism, e.g. the radical democratic politics of articulation associated with the work of Stuart Hall. And to some extent Butler's writing might be seen as providing a body of philosophical work which can be made great use of in cultural studies, and which, in effect, is gratefully received. But this still leaves unresolved the means by which religious and ethical reflections can productively intersect with those strains of social and cultural analysis which would otherwise shy away from religiosity. Zylinska has offered some insight on this question (Zylinska 2005). When the mainstream political culture of governments including the USA, the UK, Australia and some countries of the EU, is increasingly reliant on publicly deploying a moralizing vocabulary, there is good reason for the ethical reflections proposed by Butler, to be drawn upon as a means of challenging the populist language of this new moralism. In *Precarious Life*, this is conjoined with a post-structuralist analysis of sovereign power and a feminist-influenced ethics of political life. Taking these three concerns as central to the book, it is my intention here to offer a cultural studies-inflected reading of this work, not to pose it as a counter to Beck's cosmopolitan thesis, but to reflect on what it can provide as an adjacent critique.

### **New sovereignty**

If Beck has a theory of the state, it is one in which there has come into being, in the move from the first to the second modernity, and on the basis of developments in science, technology and communications, greater capacity on the part of citizens, employees and populations to engage in processes of

self-reflexivity, which in turn loosens the centralized role of state. State functionaries are increasingly widely dispersed, their diverse expertise and different responsibilities bring them into constant disagreement with one another which is an effect of reflexive modernization. Hence there are competing definitions of risk, of health and well-being or of danger, of global threats and environmental disasters. The welfarist underpinnings of the old state apparatuses of enlightened modernity have permitted and then also required an institutionalized individualization process to gather momentum so as to become one of the distinguishing characteristics of the second modernity. Beck goes to great lengths to dissociate his account of individualization from neo-liberal exhortations to the individual to assume self-responsibility so as to justify the running down of the state as provider of social welfare. The nation-state is also increasingly eclipsed by, even overshadowed by, what he calls globality and by the transnational forms of governance which new disasters and risks, new wars and human rights crises, as well as mass movements of persons and migrations from poor to rich parts of the world have precipitated. Thus there arises the need for a new meta-social theory for understanding configurations of power beyond the nation-state.

Now this admittedly bald and highly abbreviated summary of some elements of Beck's writing permits however a very immediate account of the differences between his analysis and that of Butler. Her debt to Foucault is perhaps most manifest in her understanding of state power as concerned with the management of populations, as disciplinary and discursive, as comprising diverse technologies and normalizing practices, as conducted through language and in the convergence and repetition of statements, pronouncements and iterations, such that behaviour becomes known, thinkable, recognizable and legitimated. State power is dispersed so that it has no central command, instead it takes on spatial and bodily characteristics. It is embodied, corporeal, and bio-political, it comprises visual technologies and it operates often by means of pleasurable incitement. State power also circumscribes the capacity of the subject, its subject, to contest the terms upon which his or her existence is based. Thus the possibilities of resistance are restricted, oppositional language can only be squeezed out and made to re-signify or be reterritorialized. Butler, and others also influenced by Foucault including post-colonial theorists like Edward Said and Stuart Hall, would point to those processes which made the formation of modern nation-state possible, as also entailing an organization of other populations, beyond the borders of the modern nation-state but still none the less its docile subjects, without meriting however the status of citizenship or statehood. The pervasive impact of these Foucauldian and often post-Marxist accounts of state and national identity, of subjectivizing power and disciplinary techniques, throw a long shadow of doubt over Beck's subject of reflexive modernization, endowed as he or she now is, with capacity and the ability to exercise choice.

Butler's recent writing, including *Antigone's Claim* (Butler 2000), *Precarious Life* (Butler 2004a) and *Undoing Gender* (Butler 2004c), show her to be, again, and in keeping with her earlier work on sexuality and gender, resolutely a theorist of social constraint for whom agency is a manifestation of interpellative address. She is absolutely attentive to the ways in which the highly dispersed forms of power in late modernity operate. She demonstrates how powerful forces are able to define the terms in which resistance and opposition can be imagined and pursued, and how they also push forward, to extend the range of effectivity by means of concession, by incorporating elements from a liberal (feminist) agenda for example, or by adopting and utilizing various progressive issues (e.g. gay civil partnerships). This has led some critics to suggest she presents an account of power, particularly state power, which is relentless, unyielding and one-dimensional and she is prone to collapse state activity and the judiciary as though they were the same thing (Lloyd 2005). These charges are demonstrably refuted in *Precarious Life*, as we shall see. It has also been claimed that Butler sees little opportunities for re-territorializing strategies of resistance within the field of state power. For example Lloyd argues that in relation to Antigone Butler fails to see how Creon's sovereign power cannot actually ensure Antigone's obedience. It is possible then to defy the state, as Antigone surely does. But is the state less coercive than Butler allows? Antigone defies the ban against burying her brother whose body is left out in the open, and she is duly punished. Her action shows how the state presides over matters of burial and mourning, depriving some these basic forms of recognition and penalizing those who would draw attention to state-inflicted cruelties in death as well as in life. And the irregularity which Antigone embodies and which propels her to bury her dead brother to whom she is so attached, must then make way for rigid norms of kinship to be fully instigated, with sanctions for those who transgress through inappropriate attachments. Thus we can read Butler's voice as one of warning. That, for example, where some perceived benefit might come from providing gay couples with the legal status which ensures a house will not be repossessed on the death of one partner, or that a partner will be consulted with in case of illness or death and so on, she is also alert to the way in which such gestures also exact their own cost. Recognition of gay partnership initiates, certainly within contemporary styles of UK and US governmentality, an expanded but also tightly constrained notion of family life and this has repercussions reaching back into heterosexual life, including, for example, the increasingly stigmatized status of single mothers (McRobbie 2003; Butler 2004c). In *Precarious Life* Butler once again engages with matters of life and death, with burial, grief and mourning. She critically addresses Foucault's reflections on sovereign power, and delivers an incisive analytics of state power which is now, in the context of the US after 9/11, so thoroughly dispersed as to operate with invisible effectivity far beyond the official realms of state.

Butler's five essays pursue a number of themes, key of which is her notion of the new war prison. This form of incarceration whose existence takes shape and is sustained within a largely extra-legal scenario is the focus of her analysis in the central chapter in the book 'Indefinite Detention' (Butler 2004a). Around this concept Butler's other concerns are violence, vulnerability and the Agambenian concept of 'bare life', sovereignty and governmentality, the law and extra-legal processes since 9/11, the instrumentalization of the charge of anti-semitism, and its consequences for public debate, and finally the place of ethics, in particular the Levinasian concept of the face as a means of interrupting by ethical means, the dominant political culture which would pursue pre-emptive aggression.

### **Seemingly gladly removing their burkhas . . .**

How do we respond to injury and violence and how can these experiences be reflected upon so as to avert further spirals of violence? What kind of vocabulary can intercede so as to counter calls for vengeance and for pre-emptive violence in the name of national security? Butler proposes that processes of grieving and mourning are capable of making more apparent interdependency and vulnerability. In mourning we are dispossessed, we lose something which is part of ourselves, but which is also another, and this in turn makes us mysterious or enigmatic to ourselves. I am not the same person after such a loss, who am I, and who might I now become? I must always have been also someone else. Our proclamations of loss comprise a mode of address to others wherein we reveal our vulnerability. We initiate, in enduring such loss, a new circuit of communication with others. Mourning need not mean, as it is often understood to mean, withdrawal and solitude. Recognition of this dependency on others can be the basis for new forms of political community. Vulnerability reminds us of our dependency on others. Callousness to one who is dying or to the already dead calls into question the basis of 'our' humanity. Thus our vulnerability, the fact that we can be so easily injured or harmed, gives rise to recognition of dependency, which in turn can be productive of new forms of sociability. Recognition from the other is what enables us to have a subjectivity, to have an 'I'. It is also what makes us social, we are 'constituted in cultural norms' (Butler 2004a: 45). Vulnerability and mourning both might then be understood as conducive to developing wider modes of commonality and co-operation. Communities which have suffered violence, for example women, black people, and sexual minorities, have indeed developed forms and organizations which have countered aggression by non-aggressive means. Grief can be acutely mobilizing as has been evident in the lobbying and campaigning by parents in both the USA and Britain, whose sons or daughters have been killed in these recent wars.<sup>2</sup>

First World safety and relative protection from incessant risk and danger might now be revealed to be one of its most precious privileges, when indeed that security is threatened. How might that moment of recognition of vulnerability become an opportunity to consider those others for whom such palpable and routine vulnerability is a normative condition of existence?

Butler's point is that others are part also of who we are, our initial vulnerability as infants, means we are enthralled to another, without whom we cannot survive. This dependency can either be understood as a constant condition of our humanity, the need to be cared for, or else can be carelessly cast aside, disavowed in favour of the masculinist requirement of wholeness and autonomy. This is not to say that Islamic fundamentalists pose little or no real danger, nor is it to suggest that there ought to be no response whatsoever to terrorist aggression. Instead it is to insist upon the re-opening of that space of vulnerability and inter-dependency, against the cowboy mentality of the American republican imaginary. In a voice which draws on a feminist legacy with its emphasis on intimacy, domesticity and maternity, Butler reflects on the immediacy with which she herself can mourn for the loss of the journalist Daniel Pearl, who was taken hostage and subsequently killed. She writes that he shares with her a Hebrew name. We almost invariably seek comfort in what is familiar and under circumstances such as these mourn the death of someone who reminds us of someone we might know, and with whom we share a bond of kinship. But this very reflex, Butler argues, is exactly what needs to be critically examined. Whose death is mournable and whose is not? And, in more sociological terms, what can we learn from governmental mobilizations of grief, and acts of national mourning, and the practices of boundary marking in death which are invoked in and through these rituals? In effect she is asking how can my propensity to grieve for someone who is familiar to me, and who I am also invited to grieve for on the basis of shared national identity, perhaps also shared religious faith, become a vehicle for the construction of a new ethics of grief extended to those for whom grief is for whatever reason disallowed? The very urgency of the violent situation which has arisen, and which has caused such grievous outpourings, calls for an immediate response. However such responsiveness also requires time for reflection and open debate, so as to avoid the dangers of vengeance and 'rapid rebuttal'. Butler is I think asking that we wait, that we are patient with our grief.

In the USA, following the events of 9/11, public reflection on for example those conditions of living in the impoverished world, which have given rise to animosity towards the USA, including fundamentalist anger and rage, was quickly foreclosed. This foreclosure was hastened Butler suggests by the premature capitulation of the left and liberals to the idea of a just war in Afghanistan. This made it easier for those in the peace movement to be mocked and marginalized as out-of-date and anachronistic. It helped to give legitimacy to the unapologetic masculinist and anti-intellectual voice of

Donald Rumsfeld. It further facilitated the deployment by Bush of a rhetoric of being either a friend or foe of the USA which in turn paved the way for the shrinking of media space for dissent and debate. This too-rapid capitulation to a just-war vocabulary also, doubtless, facilitated the mandate to the invasion of Iraq where the grounds for military action were also highly questionable. And when the Bush government was then able to deploy elements drawn from feminism to further justify the intervention to remove the Taliban, the difficult questions this raised were rarely confronted. Here Butler shows herself willing to query those aspects of invasionist mentality at that point where 'we' Western feminists might be most tempted to concede ground. Butler provides a warning against the desire for international political agency on the part of First World feminism. Which is to say that 'we' feminists also, like other left-liberal onlookers, perhaps even just momentarily, needed those images of girls seemingly gladly removing their burkhas, as though to reap something from a war which as Butler argues was waged on the basis of (masculinist) outrage and wounded US pride. And as we know from the work of Spivak (1999), this instrumentalization of feminism in the service of invasion and occupation demonstrates a not entirely unprecedented dynamic within a neo-imperialist mission.

### **'Petty sovereigns abound'**

How are we to explain, and what significance is to be gleaned from, the seeming departure from adherence to (and over-riding of) legal principles by the Bush government, and more recently by the Blair government also, in the light of the terrorist threat? What underlies the dispatching of (sovereign) authority to so many scattered 'petty' officials? The term indefinite detention, the category of detainee, and the emergence of the new war prison allows Butler, drawing on Foucault, to examine the new relations emerging between sovereignty and governmentality. This is a persuasive analysis which might also well be extended to understand current strategies of the UK government. And for the reason that the USA and UK have set themselves apart from agencies like the UN and indeed the EU and have found themselves at odds with aspects of the Geneva Convention, the questions Butler asks in relation to nation-state, law, prisoner of war status and the principles of the Geneva Convention have obvious repercussions in relation to a sociology of cosmopolitanization. These re-configurations of power deployed through widely dispersed tactics of everyday governmentality would need to be taken into account where there is discussion of the role of international law and human rights as key features of current cosmopolitan political discourse. And as Butler points out when even the Geneva Convention is selective in terms of those for whom it will provide legal protection, there also comes into sight

those stateless persons, asylum seekers and others who are escaping from torturous regimes who are stripped of status other than that of 'bare life'. Thus there is a double axis to engage with from a human rights perspective, the limits of international law and the re-instigation of sovereign power within powerful nation-states. Butler argues that in the Bush administration's response to the threat of terrorism there can be perceived a new and even more effective resurgence of sovereign power, less accountable to law for reasons of its transformation into a practical mode of governmentality which is the now-familiar administrative and biopolitical shape which power takes in contemporary sociality.

Law finds itself, if not suspended, a diminished force. It is a kind of irritant, an obstacle to 'getting on with the job', it is to be consulted with, but in a state of exception, it need not be heeded. This has implications also for procedures in regard to international coalitions and to the role of international human rights agencies. Thus claims Butler, governmentality becomes a site within which new (relatively) hidden or obscure powers of state can be invented and acted upon. And in turn what was once a seemingly archaic form of (almighty) power shows itself capable of taking on the garb of mere technocratic managerialism. We might add then that the running of Camp Delta would, ideally, be conducted as though it was a small private corporation with various executive and managerial offices. The new war prison finds itself existing within a largely extra-legal terrain. Military tribunals might acquit a detainee but such a verdict need not mean he is released from custody, for the reason that he is still 'deemed dangerous'. If governmentality functions through the implementation of casual, routine and mundane administrative practices in regard to the management of populations then such similar practices are the means by which as Butler argues, in a way which can easily escape scrutiny, 'governmentality produces lawless sovereignty' (Butler 2004a: 96). Thus the state of emergency is not only normalized but also begins to shape aspects of cultural as well as political and social life, 'with no end in sight'. As Butler argues this also permits the renewal of racializing discourse in regard to the look or appearance of possibly dangerous persons, thus providing grounds for everyday racism. The politics of multiculturalism, the conviviality of localized or banal cosmopolitanism, and the organizations which also advocate trans-cultural solidarity and which support the plight of dangerous others e.g. asylum seekers and refugees, also find themselves being subject to review. Thus the new war prison marks out the contours of a Kafkaesque style of sovereignty in the guise of civilian, corporate managerialism. (In Blairite terms such a strategy would be understood as the part of the modernization of both the military and the judiciary.)

This analysis by Butler provides a wealth of possibilities for future sociological analysis of the relations between state and law, well beyond the confines of the USA. Crudely we could suggest that while the UK has pursued a

rather different (and self-consciously more measured) pathway in immediate response to the tube bombings of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005, with Blair stating adamantly that this is not 'a clash of civilizations', various earlier reactions, including the dubious (if not illegal) grounds for supporting Bush in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, can also be understood within the terms laid out by Butler. The necessity of adhering to legal procedures is frequently responded to by Ministers with some obvious degree of irritation to the extent that, in the UK over the last four years, antagonistic relations between government and judiciary have come to occupy a centre stage in political life. The shoot to kill policy introduced suddenly in the aftermath of July 7<sup>th</sup> and without due discussion across the departments of government, only to be seemingly re-invoked following the killing of an innocent young Brazilian man on his way to work, reflects this cavalier relation to existing law. Law is downgraded and is even seen to be an impediment to the success of the fight against terrorism. In addition the existence of roaming officials, policy advisors, so-called tsars and unelected Ministers with senior responsibilities of state reflects the extent to which the Blair government has emulated lessons learnt from the think tanks of the Bush administration and has a governmental infrastructure already in place which facilitates dispersed sovereignty. Butler opens up for discussion, the ongoing transformation and re-emergence of sovereign power as a series of tactics, widely dispersed across social and cultural life, with the effect however of calling into questions key elements of democratic process. We might pause here, to consider how productive Butler's thought is in so far as it encourages a detailed analysis of the choreography of power currently enacted within the various pillars of the UK state, in particular the relations between government, the judiciary and also the BBC, with both legal and media institutions in the last three years finding ample ground to dispute and defend themselves against the encroachment of sovereignty by their use of subterfuge, tactical or informal means.

### **The face: laying down and dying?**

In her account of Levinasian ethics and the concept of the face we might surmise that Butler seems to move towards proposing a kind of radical pacifism. Or, if not quite that, then she is arguing for a response to violent encounters or threats to one's own life and that of others, which produces a discourse capable of intervening to challenge, interrupt and minimize aggressive retaliation. She does this through the idea of an ethics of non-violence. This is also a Jewish ethics of non-violence in so far as it emerges from reflections on the Holocaust, draws on the thinking of Levinas, and directs itself towards the current political situation in Israel. The chapter titled 'Precarious Life' also offers a response to the war in Iraq, and it conjures a language that, if

seemingly drawn from the realm of religious ethics, nevertheless suggests secular (and also aesthetic) ways of countering political violence. The face, she understands not only as a call or a demand in an encounter with one who is suffering and distressed, but also as an ethical demand. That this calling also makes us contemplate an act of violence or murder against the one who issues this demand, is an index of the inequitable relations of power and privilege which are made manifest in the encounter. Crudely, one part of us (psychically) does not wish to be burdened by this responsibility, one wants to be able to shrug it off, one wants to wish away the presence of he or she who suffers, one wants to kick the unsightly beggar, stonily ignore the woman with a tiny child asking for money from passengers on the London underground, see the removal of such people from the streets and public transport, and see an end to these violent threats of otherness that disrupt our otherwise comfortable existence.

The vulnerability of others solicits a response which Butler argues comprises both a temptation to be murderous or aggressive ourselves, and at the same time produces the possibility of the opposite of this response, the prospect of peaceful intervention. This latter emerges from the call or the demand of he or she who suffers, it is an 'ethical injunction' to refuse the impulse to retaliate, it is an address, a particular kind of address which has bodily dimensions, and which, of course, is not literally about an image or rendition of the face. In this violent encounter one's own right to survive is threatened in so far as the demand is that I must not retaliate, I must not kill. The relation which the face is productive of, is one in which he or she who has power, actually will not kill. The face gives rise to a kind of death drive, or a willing laying down of the self at the feet of the aggressor. I will not defend myself or others with whom I am associated, by violent means. But it is precisely the religiosity of the face, its capacity to make this 'divine' demand of us that interrupts the cycle of violence. The face suggests a capacity to resist violence without simply laying down and dying. Sociologists would surely object to the notion here of some kind of divine intervention, but my reading of Butler is that she has already effected, through her explication here, a kind of cultural translation whereby the enigmatic or mysterious qualities of the face comprise a reminder of the obligations (to social and economic justice, to respect for human life, to peaceful co-operation and so on) which have provided the ethical underpinning of twentieth century left-liberalism (Zylinska 2005). This language of ethical obligation in response to recent wars, invasions and occupations on the part of the USA and its coalition, is able to generate a more complex vocabulary for understanding, and also challenging the reliance of powerful western governments on simplified moralisms, and on ideas of moral authority which in turn reduce mainstream political life to banalities and managerial strategies. Butler's ethical response also constitutes a challenge to the left-liberals who have found themselves suspending the critique of violence on the basis of a just war, and who now also have to contend with the conditions which

arise from the normalization and 'indefinite extension' of the state of exception.

We might conclude by asking, what can this ethics of non-violence contribute to Ulrich Beck's sociology of cosmopolitanization? First, and echoing Zylinska's point, such a sociology should be able to draw on ethical reflection so as to be better understand, refute and supplant the dangers of the moralism which seem to provide plausible responses to contemporary threats to global security. Second such a sociology might open up some of its own disciplinary boundaries so that it is enriched by engagement with other forms of writing (memoir, fiction, poetry) which have been available as forms for recording experience and documenting events in adverse situations (in prison, in great poverty, in concentration camps) where the doing of sociology has historically been unthinkable, but where these other cultural forms can be understood as de facto sociological discourses. It is this kind of scenario of intense deprivation or suffering which accounts for the close engagement with art, poetry, music, fiction and autobiography within the post-colonial sociology and cultural studies writing associated with Paul Gilroy (1993, 2000) Stuart Hall (1996), Bell Hooks (1994), and others, and also within the sociology of the holocaust (Bauman 1993; Back 2002; Butler 2004d) and finally also within feminist sociology and feminist cultural studies (Ahmed 2002; Berlant 2000). Third, and finally, this new sociology would also engage with Butler's re-conceptualization of a Foucauldian approach to governmentality as sovereignty has been incorporated into the mundane, administrative and managerial power of the state. The new war prison thus figures as a mode of incarceration reflecting this informal, managerial form of power. The 'capricious proceduralism outside the law' (Butler 2004a: 92) also has ramifications which are more broadly cultural. If sovereignty inside governmentality informally licenses the intensification of aggression in and across everyday life, there is an even greater need for an ethical vocabulary which might provide the terms for opposing everyday cultures of aggression.

These above points underscore the contribution of Butler's (cosmopolitan) ethics, but earlier I suggested that *Precarious Life* also asked a range of impossible questions, and it is to this that, by way of a conclusion, I wish to return. The idea of making our dependency on others the basis for a new politics: of mobilizing our bodily vulnerability as a means of transcending the invoking of fear by government, so as to forge a connection with others who are daily exposed to such vulnerability: of responding with humility and generosity to those others with whom we have little or no shared understanding; and the posing of these ethical stances as priorities, is to bring into political discussion at this moment in time a radically distinct vocabulary which might be seen by many as profoundly unrealizable. In many ways this demonstrates the extent to which there has been a near fatal exclusion from public debate in recent years of solidaristic and compassionate values. So also have feminist voices

been pushed into the margins, in times of masculinist militaristic retrenchment. Instead we have almost grown used to hearing comments in the media, from the US military, like 'we took the gloves off', in relation to the US assault in Falluja in November 2004. Thus I would end by arguing that Butler's voice is the more remarkable for its singularity, not that she alone speaks in these terms, but that she does so on the basis of priorities which could be described as minoritarian, or reminiscent of a Deleuzian politics of becoming minor. It is this politics of humility that links Butler's engagement with both Levinas and Foucault. Such a politics, while seemingly removed from the more conventionally majoritarian sociology of Ulrich Beck, based as it is on the assumption that we can somehow learn to understand each other and on this basis conduct a global politics so as to minimize catastrophe and conflict, converges with Beck, nevertheless, on the desirability of creating a 'public culture of dissent'.

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## Notes

\* Thanks to various colleagues and to the anonymous reviewer for useful comments.

1. The question of Butler's relation to leftist politics remains ambivalent. And yet, on the basis of her deep engagement with the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and in particular with his account of 'interpellation' in his famous *Ideological State Apparatuses* essay, such an appropriation of Butler does not seem so surprising (see Butler 1997).

2. The mobilization by grief-stricken parents following the loss of a son or daughter in both the USA and UK armed forces has proved one of the most effective features of the antiwar campaign. Beck would surely connect such actions with his earlier work on 'sub-politics', while Butler might possibly reflect on the openings provided by these modes of mourning to unite with grieving parents in Iraq.

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