

Interview with Judith Butler
Gender Trouble: Still Revolutionary or Obsolete?
10/08/2007

Bang Bang is a Belgium weekly Queer radio magazine mixing genders and refusing separation among genders. Bang Bang focuses on lesbian, gay, and trans cultures and shows how gender has an influence on main stream culture.

In May 2007 Aurore interviewed Judith Butler during her visit to Brussels.

BB : AT THE TIME YOU PUBLISHED « GENDER TROUBLE », THE BOOK HAD GREAT SUCCES AND WAS CONSIDERED REVOLUTIONARY. YEARS HAVE PASSED, DO YOU THINK THE IDEAS OF « GENDER TROUBLE » ARE STILL REVOLUTIONARY OR SLOWLY BEING ACCEPTED ?

JB : Well, it's hard for me to say. I think I never expected "Gender trouble" to have any particularly revolutionary effect so whatever effects it has, I'm always surprised. I think we have to ask, not what "Gender trouble" is today but where "Gender trouble" is today. So, for instance, when "Gender trouble" is translated into Japanese, it produces a problem of vocabulary and a way of thinking about a quality for instance that is somewhat controversial in academic circles and also outside of the academy. In other places, "Gender trouble" is old. I mean, you know, in New York, it is old. I mean it's sweet. I mean people are really kind about it but it's like a former love affair you had and you're done. You know ? But look, "Gender trouble" includes a critique of the idea that there are two ideal bodily forms, two ideal morphologies: the masculine and the feminine. I want to suggest that today the intersex movement is very engaged with criticizing that idea. Not all bodies are born in male or female. There is a continuum of bodies and it seems to me that trying to persuade medical and psychiatrist establishments to deal with the intersex involves critique of the binary gender system. Similarly there continues to be extreme, sometimes very extreme violence against transgender people. And it seems to me that "Gender trouble" will always be important to try and open up our ideas of what gender is. So, I don't know if it's revolutionary, but maybe it still has something to say to those issues.

BB : YOU JUST SAID : WHEN « GENDER TROUBLE » IS TRANSLATED, IT PRODUCES A PROBLEM OF VOCABULARY. DEALING WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT GENDER WITH A DIFFERENT APPROACH, CAN A NEW VOCABULARY BE EXPERIMENTED AND DEVELOPPED SCIENTIFICALLY AND CURRENTLY?

JB : You know I do think it's important that we experiment with new vocabularies. That new words help us conceptualize our social existence in a different way. But I think maybe it's more important to know the traditional concepts we have for thinking about how bodies are feminine or masculine or how sexuality is, straight or gay. These categories very often fail to describe the complexity of who we are. So it's not like it's a brand new vocabulary that permits to have a new reality. It's rather a new vocabulary that lets us see that our lives have always been more complex than traditional categories allow. So, I think, you know, maybe the introduction of new words permits us to rethink what we've taken for granted about what forms bodies take, what the name is for certain kinds of sexual, intimate relations, how we think of a life. You know when somebody says "I'm gay, I'm straight, I'm bisexual". You know, are they saying I am these things for all time? It seems to me that the word "queer" allows you to have a life in which there are changes. In which, yes, you have this straight thing, and that gay thing, and you might be bi or you might not. But you're an evolving and transforming person, right? And how do we capture that dynamics of sexuality in that complex sense? There may be times when someone feels oneself more overly masculine or maybe more feminine, or where the terms themselves become confused, where passivity and activity also don't maintain their usual meaning. Right? But if we think about sexual life for a gender life, it seems to me that we have to allow for certain kinds of changes or certain kinds of ways of reconceptualizing ourselves. So, for instance, my hope was that the word "queer" would allow people to have a less fixed and normative idea of what their identity is and permit them a greater vocabulary for gender infrasexuality.

BB : DO YOU THINK THE WORD « QUEER » IS TO EASILY AND OFTEN USED ? ANY FESTIVITIES CAN BE GAY AND LESBIAN BUT THEY ARE SUDDENLY « QUEER », ETC...

JB : Well, in certain places, yes. And in other places, no. So, again, I want to say, it's not a question of saying what is "queer" now but where is "queer" now, you know? 'cause if we say "Oh, queer, it's all become domesticated and very accepted etc..." , we can say yes it is true in Brussels, and maybe it's true in Amsterdam and maybe it's true in parts of Paris. But then, in which arrondissement? You know? I mean, we have to think of the world as larger than that. You know, I worry when "queer" becomes an identity. It was never an identity. It was always a critique of identity. I think if it ceases to be a critique of identity, it's lost its critical edge.

BB : YOU ARE SAYING, WE ARE CONSTITUTED FROM ANTERIORITY AND EXTERIORITY ; THERE IS NO DEFINED NORM WHEN WE ARE BORN; ONE SHOULD TAKE DISTANCE FROM THE NORM IN ORDER TO BEGIN BUILDING ONESELF AND MAKE A CHOICE. FOR THE LISTENERS, CAN YOU GIVE A PATH OF PROGRESSION ? HOW TO START THINKING WHAT TYPE OF MAN OR WOMAN ONE IS? HOW MUCH MASCULINITY OR FEMINITY ONE HAS ? WHAT CAN AN INDIVIDUAL DO?

JB : Ok, let me say one thing to clarify my position. I think we can take distance from norm but I think we are also mired in norm, "empêtrés", I think you say in French. And I think the choices we can make are only in a certain struggle with the norms out of which we're constituted, right? So, when I was young there were lesbians who said "Oh, I will free myself of all norms of masculinity, all norms of heterosexuality ". And then, they ended up in very complex relationships that were maybe full of heterosexual power dynamics or full of lesbian forms of masculinity and they became very confused. It wasn't possible just to rid oneself, simply, of the norms through which one is constituted. One struggles always with these norms. So one doesn't construct oneself freely without respect to norm but one works with one's historical situation and sees where there might be some play. Where there might be some freedom to move.

BB : YOU ARE ALSO SAYING, IT IS DANGEROUS. ONE IS INTELLIGIBLE, WHEN LIVING IN THE NORMS. AND SO, UNINTELLIGIBLE, LIVING OUTSIDE THE NORMS AND TAKING RISKS. THEN, HOW TO BEGIN WITH THE LEAST DISTRESS ?

JB : I think it's important to live with a certain danger and a certain risk. I think we need a politics that allows us to risk what is intelligible. To be maybe slightly unintelligible, too be slightly "illisible". To take the risk of suggesting that the human form might take another form. That it doesn't comply with genders that make us "visibles". We have to ask how we can stretch and how sometimes we can break the norms that determine what's intelligible and readable and what is not. The real question is how do you survive at the same time you pose those risks? Because you need to survive. And it seems to me that you survive in community or in solidarity, with others who are taking the risk with you. So there might be a kind of collective effort that allows for those risks to be taken, pose a certain danger but not a suicidal one.

BB : JUDITH BUTLER, HAVE YOU DONE THIS WORK ? IS JUDITH BUTLER THE SAME WOMAN TODAY AS 20 YEARS AGO ?

JB : *Mais je suis une jeune femme, c'est un scandale ! Oui. On ne naît pas une femme, on devenir (devient, NdT) une femme. Et je ne suis pas sûre que je deviens une femme. Alors, quelle est votre autre question ?*

(But I am a young woman. Its a scandal, yes. We are not born women, we become women. And i am not sure I am becoming a woman. Then, what is your next question?)

BB : WHAT OTHER RISKS DID YOU TAKE BESIDES THE WRITING AND THE REFLECTIVE THEORY ?

JB : Well, you know, I must say, I feel the reception of my work is none of my business. You know? It's not my concern. It's your concern. I just keep working. I keep posing certain questions and I think there are times when people think "What happened to the Judith Butler I used to know?" or "She's not doing gender trouble. Does that mean she refuses it or she's disavowed it?" And I would say no. I have not refused or disavowed anything. I have simply taken some of the same questions and reposed them in new ways. But, you see, I must live. Right? I mean I can't stay the same for everyone to be consumed as the author of "Gender trouble". I have to continue to live and that means I have to

“reposer les questions”.

BB : BEING A PERSONALITY RECOGNIZED BY THE ACADEMY, HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR GENDER QUESTIONS CAN INFLUENCE OUR SOCIETY ? DO YOU THINK THAT YOUR IDEAS HAVE FINALLY INFLUENCED THE SOCIETY IN AN EXTENSIVE WAY ? OR THEY SIMPLY INFLUENCED PEOPLE THOUGHTS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND GENDRE ? DO YOU SEE THE EVOLUTION OF YOUR IDEAS TRAVELING THROUGH POLITICAL AND POPULAR CULTURE ?

JB : Well, I think, what I want to say is that yes, my ideas have travelled into popular culture they also emerged from popular culture in a way, or from the general public as you put it. But not as a program. You know? I mean, as in “Here is a political program which I recommend we put into place”. Rather, as a theorist, I open up some questions of what is possible. Or I try to re-imagine what life and identity and questions of justice might be like. And then other take them up. And you know, one sees art, work with something else than what I have done. Or one sees some kind of work in law that takes up some of my ideas, but does something that I, myself, could not have anticipated, would not have known how to do. Right? So, yes, I mean, it travels. Sometimes, occasionally “Gender trouble” appears on a television show in the US as a kind of funny moment. But that’s ok with me, that’s good. Many people have said, you know, “it’s so difficult, writing is so difficult, complicated. It can’t possibly have any effect on the general public”. But what’s strange, is that so many people are willing to torture themselves and read the book anyway. And then, that is an interesting question. Maybe we have an anti-intellectual idea of the “public général”. “Oh, that will never have an effect on “le public général””. But maybe, in fact, le “public général” is interested in certain ideas and would like to understand gender better. So yes, I have also been invited to talk to psychologists and psychoanalysts and I liked that very much. Because, they are the ones who are bringing a lot of very, you know, problematic ideas about sexuality and gender into psychiatric and psychological settings. And I like having some influence there.

BB : HOW IS IT IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF UNITED STATES ? IS THERE ENOUGH FREEDOM TO SPEAK ABOUT GENDRE OR SEXUALITY TOPIC ? OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY, DO YOU SHARE THE IDEA THAT UNITED STATES IS POLARIZED BETWEEN CONVENTIONALS AND RADICALS ?

JB : Well, I think it’s complicated you know. The United States are such a large place. And there are some states and some cities where the questions of gender or sexuality would not be asked, or where scholars or academics are working in small little corners of the universities trying to raise these questions and being told that either that they’re strange or not appropriate or being actively opposed. There are other places where there is very active scholarship going on. Certainly on gender. I think gender has become maybe more accepted as an academic topic than sexuality studies or queer studies. So I think there is no one answer. It is still a struggle, there are tensions and I’m sure there are many people who would like to see these questions laid to rest or cease to be posed altogether.

BB : AND MY LAST QUESTION IS ABOUT THE « HATE SPEECH » ; THERE IS IN EUROPE A MOVEMENT ABOUT PENALIZING THE HOMOPHOBIC SPEECH AND IN THE SAME WAY IT IS AGAINST THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ; THIS WILL STOP ME FROM CRITIZISING THE POLITICAL PROPOSALS LIKE, AS AN EXEMPLE, THE HOMOSEXUAL UNION. WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ?

JB : *Alors, c’est une grande question. OK, comment commencer avec la question si grande ?* I think one has to look in the particular context in which these questions emerge. So, for instance, it’s important that if one opposes discriminatory speech, one opposes all kinds. That is that one decides on a principle that it will include all minorities. But if the protection of one minority against another minority is what is happening, then I worry about that. Right? You could protect a religious minority against gays and lesbians. Or you could protect gays and lesbians against a religious minority. And then, it seems to me something political is happening. Because we’re not really looking at the kind of speech that is injurious. We’re trying to divide groups or decide that some of them are truly victims and some of them are truly aggressors. So my sense is that one has to be careful with this. In the US the problem has been, for instance, that Nazis have rights of free expression, right? But other kinds of racist speech is not protected. And you have to link the speech to conduct or to a certain kind of threat against minority population. I know that in Europe, this kind of framework doesn’t exist in the same

way so it's very difficult to make the analogy. I do think we need to allow for there to be room for subversive and ironic speech. We need to be able to put out plays in which we make fun of ourselves or in which we interrogate the words that injure us. And maybe give them another meaning. Maybe resignify them in some ways that robs them of their power to injure. So for instance in rap music, you very often hear words that would seem very racist, or very misogynous or very homophobic but in some of those instances, the words are being taken back or redefined so that they lose their injurious quality. So we need to be I think equally sensitive to the injurious power of certain kinds of speech acts but also to the subversive and possibly liberatory effects of certain kinds of play.

DURING THE PAST 30 YEARS, WOULD YOU SAY THAT THE GENDER HAS PROGRESSED OR IT IS THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE GENDRE THAT HAS IMPROVED?

JB : I want to say that the way in which we understand gender actually changes the way we live gender. As we interpret ourselves differently, we also live ourselves differently. The important thing is to think about theory in life in that way. And I think we don't have to be theorists, we don't have to have gone to the academy, or to the university to learn theory and to be a theorist of gender. I mean, every taxi driver I have ever spoken to has a theory of gender. Ok, I mean, everyone has a set of presuppositions: what gender is, what it's not. And they may not write them out or they may not be in theoretical books published by Routledge, but they have a theory, right? And if you have a conversation "Why is it you think masculinity is linked with heterosexuality? Or why is it you think masculinity is linked with sexual dominance or the sexually active position in the sex act?" If you start to ask people those questions, then they realize "Maybe gender is not one thing. Maybe I have collected a number of things under one category and I've made a mistake". But once you see that, it could be that you, yourself, live differently. A certain kind of permission is given to live differently, to conceptualize and to act according to a new conceptualization.

BB: THANK YOU, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

NdT: The phrases in italics were pronounced in French during the interview.

The English Transcription of the interview was made by Stéphanie Lange and Sandrine Debuyserie.