

RADICAL PHILOSOPHY

Menu

issue 2.08 series 2 Autumn 2020

search ...



Bodies in space On the ends of vulnerability Marina Vishmidt

RP 2.08 (Autumn 2020)



Weaker now, we mistakenly identify ourselves as our bodies.

Ilona Sagar, 'Correspondence O', digital video, 2017

I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

The last quarter of the twentieth century marked the emergence of ‘the body’ as a key heuristic in much post-structuralist and post-foundationalist cultural theory and philosophy. More recently, the terminology of ‘bodies’ has moved to the foreground in academic debates, but also gained traction in activist discourses and everyday forms of cultural speech. This is a terminology, primarily Anglophone, that speaks of bodies as subjects (‘we are/there are bodies’) rather than as objects (‘we/they have bodies’). ‘Bodies’ as the basic unit that enumerates humans in (a) space assumes the status of a convention by means of a prior or ongoing shift to a consensus that invoking ‘bodies’ as such is to name them as the locus of socio-political agency in preference to or in distinction from terms such as ‘person/s’, ‘people’, ‘individuals’ or ‘subjects’. The rationale for such a move is ostensibly its potential to take us beyond the humanist confines of such taxonomies, with their entrenched legacies of subject/object dualism, at best, and their openings to colonial, racist and patriarchal epistemologies, at worst. A ‘posthumanist’ turn in contemporary theory also constitutes, in this sense, part of the backdrop informing a discourse of ‘bodies’, suggesting a jettisoning of human privilege in allocations of value and significance across scales in a relational, intra-active universe, as well as a wider shift toward the ‘object’, the ‘thing’ and other non-personal forces such as ‘affect’ in many variants of post-phenomenological ‘new materialism’.

Any survey of the terminological shift over the past decade would point to roughly this order of emancipatory motivation, stemming initially from radical campus politics but soon becoming a commonplace in grassroots political circles (with which academia has become increasingly porous) as well as art institutional spaces such as 2017’s documenta, with its iterative talks programme called ‘Parliament of Bodies’. This is a phenomenon traceable to the nexus between the nebulous category of ‘identity politics’ and progressive politics tout court as it has taken shape in the last decade of movements against capitalist crisis. These have often articulated themselves in biopolitical terms, that is to say, with the condition of bodies serving as the baselines for liveable life, whether politicised in revolt or its frequently lethal management of the state. Movements to protect lives and resist state and structural violence

(Movement for Black Lives, NiUnaMenos); movements for social reproduction and against the destruction of the social and geophysical commons (Standing Rock); alongside movements for the defense of migrants and against the brutality of securitised borders everywhere. Needless to say, the defense of 'bodies' as such is hardly an apt description of these movements' wide agendas, with corporeal vulnerability and exposure to death looming larger for the groups organising against racialised and gendered state and social violence, while movements concerned with ecosystems and border management contend against vulnerability on a number of scales. Nonetheless, it can be noted that defense of living conditions and physical integrity is an element that more tangibly cuts across the agendas of a number of contemporary social movements than do any ideological precepts more conventionally understood.

The language of 'bodies' thus symptomatically appears to flag the vulnerability of growing numbers of the population abandoned without means of social and economic support as physical beings, as well as how those same conditions work to effect their reduction to the fragile, isolated quanta of consumption and discipline modelled by financialised structures of social reproduction and the platform capitalism that is currently their most efficient mode of delivery. Articulating the predicament in terms of 'bodies', rather than another term from the archive of political or psychological subjectivation, underlines the prioritisation of vulnerability, or, more generally, life, materiality and affect which constitutes the parameters of basic political analysis today. Vulnerability, or, more concretely, exposure and exclusion, seems so much a facet of daily experience for so much of the global population (even in the 'West') that, for many theorists, they suggest the parameters of any critical analysis that would prove adequate to both diagnosing this state and imagining forms of collective life otherwise. Depending on respective commitments in political theory, vulnerability as general condition – a general condition pertaining to isolated bodies – is geared to a demand for recognition and representation, where narratives of resistance should align with this basic understanding. Hence, as writers such as Asad Haider have observed in the related context of 'identity', a politics construed in such terms remains both

sufficiently flexible, and sufficiently idealist, to unite positions across the spectrum from liberal to far-left. It also, decisively, points further right, as noted by the many commentators who have framed far-right positions as constituting a white identity politics.¹ Such a capacious spectrum, in the current climate, is quickly found to harbour ambiguous implications. If political actors are held to be acting politically insofar as they organise on the basis of their vulnerability, then no common horizon beyond pain management can be envisioned. And if pain management is the horizon, the opioid abuse of politics – blaming the outsiders, blaming the different – hovers close at hand.

If such a tendency is to read as symptomatic, what symptoms does the politics of vulnerability centring on ‘bodies’ express? This will form the main strand of the following essay. I will suggest that, at base, the discourse of ‘bodies’ presents us with the possibility of a pseudo-concreteness that often accompanies theoretical projects intolerant of the (real) abstraction that organises contemporary social life. It thus accepts the bio-, if not necro-, political, premises of the current dispensation – one that capitalises on the fragile, isolated and suffering body. The question of how and why such bodies are *produced* and mediated is necessarily elided, and this fragility, isolation and suffering is converted into ethical plenitude. Such a plenitude can be seen as both concrete and compensatory, whereas the brutal effects of social antagonism in the endurance of intensive social warfare from above, as it is invariably classed, gendered and racialised, seem impossible to remedy.² This then tends to confirm rather than challenge a status quo in which ‘the reproduction of capitalism and the reproduction of organisms become indistinguishable’.³ Though concentrating on ‘bodies’ as the main category of interest, ‘the body’ as an older, and certainly more capacious, category of analysis and description in philosophy and social theory cannot be entirely occluded, particularly as many of the theoretical debates that work with the discourse of ‘bodies’ draw upon earlier phenomenological, psychoanalytic or affect theory-derived notions of the body as the substance of their link to materialism, which is to say, the ‘new materialism’ where the body functions

not as an abstraction, in Marx's terms, but rather as one of the many incarnations of an ever more pervasive vital matter.

What kinds of social relation make such a thing as 'the body' or 'bodies' not just legible but the basis for any form of political subjectivation that resonates with historical life in the present? Anxieties about division – philosophically into body and mind, politically by different ideologies or group affiliations – seem to be central to the embrace of contemporary 'bodies'-centric discourse. It is an anxiety that would thus seem to evoke, in its obverse, the old-fashioned idiom of 'souls' to refer to numerical aggregates or individuals, as the Thoreau passage in my epigraph illustrates, in its droll articulation of each with the other. As such, it carries with it, despite very divergent critical touchstones, an element of what could be called a 'jargon of authenticity' – the positing of something basic and fundamental as a substratum to all further thought; something which produces but is itself not produced, which conditions but is itself unconditioned. This resonates with Adorno's suggestion that at a specific historical point second nature becomes prior to first nature.⁴ The body becomes a site where all politics has to begin but which itself manages to avoid scrutiny as a political problem or a contradictory enunciation. Eclipsed as well in this usage, interestingly, is the older usage of 'body' to refer to a corporate entity such as a group or organisation, no less than to 'bodies' as deceased. Contemporary 'bodies' are insistently material, physical, vital and animated, in an insistently empiricist register.

The following essay thus represents an attempt to undertake something of a genealogical survey of the transition to and establishment of the idiom of 'bodies', departing from its contemporary political and cultural currency, before developing its principal focus on those writers in political philosophy who have mobilised this idiom most explicitly in recent years, most obviously Judith Butler, and cataloguing the generative yet equivocal results of these projects. Particular prominence will be given in this regard to the elaboration of Hannah Arendt's concept of the public that Butler has been developing over the past nine years. Following this, another itinerary of 'bodies' will be drawn,

seeking to demonstrate that ‘bodies’, like the individual in Gilbert Simondon’s ‘individuation’, are not prior to but the outcome of capitalist processes of ‘body-fication’, the production of ‘bodies’ whose biopolitical character has to be taken as having a thoroughly historical and social character, thereby constituting a privileged instance of social abstraction rather than a social ontology of given-ness.

Assembling bodies

Judith Butler’s 2011 essay ‘Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street’ is concerned with understanding the occupation of urban public space as an emergent shape of resistance in the ‘movements of the squares’ in North Africa and in Spain, as well as emerging in the United States at that time, and shortly thereafter in the UK, with Occupy. In this article, which was revisited in other pieces and eventually became the book *Notes Toward a Theory of Performative Assembly*,⁵ Butler drew together her interests in precarity and the ethics of vulnerability and exposure to develop an Arendtian argument about public space as the original scene of the political, but going beyond and in some ways counter to Arendt. She does this mainly by noting that ‘Arendt’s view is confounded by its own gender politics, relying as it does on a distinction between the public and private domain that leaves the sphere of politics to men, and reproductive labour to women. If there is a body in the public sphere, it is masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create, but not itself created.’⁶ Thus, while Butler’s concept of public space and political visibility is an Arendtian one, her concept of it as constituted by vulnerable and dependent bodies is not. That is, she agrees with Arendt that politics creates a public space and happens in public space, and that the political is a species of performative speech. However, the concept of the political as the space of public action is expanded to include the ‘private’ or the reproductive, which is jettisoned by Arendt in fidelity to the classical Greek conception of a de-socialised, eternal *oikos*. At the same time, bodily performativity is substituted for Arendt’s prioritisation of speech, and a focus on need takes the place of her focus on action performed by independent agents for an audience. The

political, for Butler, is generated in the space 'between' bodies, and relies on a recognition of mutual alterity, contingency and a dependency which can be understood as horizontal (dependency among the assembled) as well as vertical (on the infrastructures of reproduction of life provided, or not provided, by the state and the economy).

Yet, the simple expansion of the space designated as properly political in a formalist theory such as Arendt's proves less than capable of altering its intrinsically formalist character. If anything, the extension of political signification to the affective and the bodily are surer anchors for this ahistorical formalism, inasmuch as the vulnerable body makes an intuitive kind of sense as the ground of a political that is shared by everyone. This is so to the extent that their conditions of life are imbued with precarity, which functions both as a distinct feature of the historical present and an ontological premise of human existence – albeit, in some texts, it is relationality that is underlined rather than any anthropological constant, although it remains unclear whether the former is not confirmed after all as the latter. ⁷

The emphasis on corporeality likewise resonates with the phenomenological and theological elements in her thinking that Butler has acknowledged in discussions of the influence of figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emanuel Levinas and Martin Buber. ⁸ This is one aspect that problematises Butler's move to re-introduce feminist dimensions such as collectivity, dependency, care, and in general, the social and material preconditions of appearance in public as a materialist challenge to Arendt's classicist (or antiquarian) concept of public space. The other is that the politics of vulnerability that is articulated through the needs and dependencies of living bodies is relatively lightly contextualised in socially and historically differentiated terms. The escalating inequities of crisis neoliberalism are sketched in, as well as specific episodes of contemporary protest and the gamut of state repression in which they can be located. In all these iterations, the visibility of living bodies to one another, to mediated witnesses and the state – a visibility which is a public articulation of the commonality of

precarity, of exposure, of need – is the bedrock that connects ontological precarity to historical crises of social reproduction, here reformulated as a crisis of representation. The overriding theme of the politics of vulnerability generated thereby is that an acknowledgement of common need, of common dependency, is *already* a ‘common’ in the sense of a common space of affect, of contestation, and of making a claim on commonly produced wealth and its institutions of governance. Affectability converts invariably into resistance; a resistance which is ethically valorised because it is about ontological precarity, and politically valorised because it is a *common* for all living, but especially human, beings.

The notion that the assembly of bodies is ontologically prior and in constitutive excess to the reasons for the assembly is not unique to Butler. It is a feature also of much thinking around the multitude and other principally but not exclusively post-anarchist approaches that downplay questions of ideology, power or organisation in favour of the dynamic of horizontality as its own end. A substantial degree of political ambiguity attends such a hypothesis, as already noted. Butler concedes this in later work, adding several caveats to the notion of assembly as the privileged site of contemporary politics.⁹ These include that assembly can also be in digitally networked space or even in sites of incarceration, where the conditions do not permit large peaceful gatherings, and that vulnerability cannot be used as the criterion for making emancipatory political claims given the level of right-wing and neo-fascist backlash which couches its rhetoric precisely in the vocabulary of fear, invasion and defense from the barbaric other, be it marauding refugees or scholars of gender studies. This is not to mention the police officers who cease to feel safe when police impunity in deploying lethal force becomes a matter of popular objection. Finally, drawing on all these caveats, Butler hedges her bets against the optimism of the partisans of the ‘multitude’ as the political subject to reckon with.¹⁰ Nonetheless, what is not at issue in any of these qualifications is the centrality of *bodies* as the minimal unit of ‘the political’, only the contingent purpose of their assembly.

In this light, the ‘performative theory of assembly’s choice to anchor its stakes in ‘bodies’ that generate rather than are contained by public space, which becomes a form of legibility that dramatises the material needs unmet in the society – needs which are both represented and compounded by these forms of collective manifestation – runs the risk of turning these bodies into an example of a ‘simple’ or ‘chaotic abstraction’, comparable to the basic notion of ‘population’ that Karl Marx cites in his discussion of dialectical method.¹¹ Bodies are depicted as implicated in webs of relationality, but bodies are also a given, insofar as they act precisely as a placeholder for the more complex notions of onto-theological precarity, and asymmetries of ‘value’ and ‘grievability’, that for Butler describe the social positioning of bodies in and beyond the site of assembly. ‘Bodies’ likewise act as placeholders for the often ahistorical notion of ‘needs’ – bodies have needs, we know what these needs are, and that they are invariant and non-negotiable. Because they are invariant and non-negotiable, their ethical status is equally invariant and non-negotiable; this is how they supply political possibility. So long as a category remains a simple abstraction, it remains a presupposition and not a category which can sustain a concrete process of inquiry capable of generating abstractions with greater analytical traction. As Kevin Floyd reconstructs Marx’s method in the *Grundrisse*:

In the two movements Marx describes here, movements leading to the establishment in thought of an internally differentiated whole, theoretical abstractions are concretised: a chaotic conception of totality is concretised by way of ever simpler abstractions, and then these simple abstractions are themselves concretised in turn through an establishment of their determinate interconnections, through a more complex reconstruction of the totality with which the process began, now understood “as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.”¹²

Simple abstractions are often encountered in formalist theories of ‘the political’, which Butler here, along with Arendt, shares with thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and, to a point, Jacques Rancière. The political has no content because it is a matter of contingency, not of any structural determinacy. While it is not unusual to encounter critiques from Marxist perspectives in response to this tendency, there are other projects, as we will

see later, in political and critical theory that also look to the present-day echoes of histories of racialised and gendered commodification to articulate their critiques of the body as a category of self-ownership and a mode of recognition by the state that operates the more efficiently in its violent suspension.

My point is not to diagnose a 'deficit' of materialism at this juncture, since Butler has never located her work within the problematic of historical materialism. Rather it is intended to point to how theoretical engagements with 'bodies' denote a symptomatic anxiety about concreteness in their desire to bypass the materiality of social abstraction in favour of the predicament of the suffering body. An axiom central to liberal political theory can be seen at work here: the space of recognition by the state may be wholly transformed by means of its expansion, and inclusion thus becomes the horizon of transformation. This is the persistent liberalism which, in the language of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, evacuates the conflictual 'plans' of movements and converts them into the 'policy' of managing the needs of 'abandoned populations', though only so long as any political capital may be yielded thereby.¹³ As Butler notes, large groups of people assembling in public space can also provide legitimation to states, as a testimony to the freedom of assembly in ostensibly democratic polities.¹⁴ Consequently, it is only the footage of police assault that can undermine the use-value of assembly in this register of legitimation. Naturally, it is the abused body which performs as the index of political legibility in this case, just as the speaking body performed in the other one.

The notion that emancipatory political thinking departs from bodies, or *the* body, is of course not altogether new. Indeed, a longer genealogy of this tendency would have to include all politicisations of the body, which encompasses pretty much any resistant or revolutionary movement, particularly those 'new social movements' which were motivated by their common address to people whose bodies were stigmatised through race, gender, sexuality or ability. The stronger meaning of 'the personal is political'

always gestured to the somatic. Yet in the trajectory of Butler's own thought, and her relationship to feminist and queer theory, there is a curious development in this regard, which can only be very briefly recapitulated here.

Bodies That Matter was published in 1993, in part as a corrective to a certain reception of *Gender Trouble*.¹⁵ If that text was deemed to be in danger of 'losing the body', in all its intractability and materiality, within a generalised notion of linguistic performance, with the second book Butler was concerned not with conjuring the tenuous self-evidence of 'the body' back onto the scene, but rather with developing a concept of the body as constructed, in alignment with the project of dismantling the established division between a socially constructed gender and a pre-discursive sex. The body as an inscribable surface which was not natural or prior to discourse, and, at least in this sense, incapable of serving as an ontological redoubt for a politics of resistance, was equally informed by the deconstructive framework of Derrida – and it is deconstruction that she mobilises against an unreflected or idealist concept of 'social construction'¹⁶ – and by the power/knowledge framework of Foucault, with its examination of how the production of 'regulatory constraints' such as bodily and gender norms comes to be experienced as the most natural, unmediated and *material* thing in the world by the subject. These 'regulatory norms' evoke a materiality which is an effect of power; more succinctly, something like a corporeality or a materiality of the body (and its sex) cannot be conceived apart from the 'materialisation processes' activated by the meshwork of power. In a salient phrase, Butler calls power 'a constrained and iterative production', and it is in the margins of error and disruption *between* iterations that there is political agency for any individual or collective, which can capture those margins as significant difference (as mattering), against the repetition of the same, timeless norm: 'an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all'.¹⁷

However, in this reading the distinction between construction and production does not come into focus, and there is a similar implicitness to the ontological

gap between a re-articulation and a transformation of the 'horizon' in which a body registers as a body (as opposed to an abject or deformed 'thing' projected as deviant), and how it comes to discursively and socially 'matter'. In the two and a half decades since the publication of *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's preoccupations have shifted, to a degree, although much has also remained consistent, such as the founding deconstructive gesture that subsumes the political in the ethical.

This trajectory is complicated, though not diverted, by the broad proximity of the account in *Bodies That Matter*, as already noted, with Foucault's accounts of biopolitics in its moment of focusing on the disciplinary implementation of norms, rather than the later, more emphatically ethical tenor of the 'care of the self' writings. With that in mind, it is still important to inquire how it is that we go from the body as the construction of discursive power effects to a political theory, or a description of political performativity, in which 'bodies', whether taken as 'units in space' or as artefacts of a primary relationality, become *de facto* signifiers of agency and authenticity for any politics whatsoever. Surprisingly, the ultimate stakes of a critique of representation turn out to be the dismantling of the traces of representation carried by the idiom of 'people' or 'persons' in order to arrive, simply, at 'bodies' as such – presumed to be living (not dead) and human (not animal or machinic in an everyday sense) but otherwise free of any determinations or residual dualisms.

Weaker together

Foucault's discussions of the governance of populations as biological entities, in a way unprecedented enough as to be one of the distinctive marks of (European, national, colonial) modernity, is the source for most mobilisations of the concept of 'biopolitics' in recent theory. The concept of biopolitics makes the explicit linkage between economy and living capacity as the secret theology of the secular modern state, differentially applied to the de-valorised positions of women and enslaved or colonised subjects, although this is not a point explicitly developed by Foucault. ¹⁸ The recent terminology of 'bodies'

seems like a working-out or an internalisation of these ideas as they have pervaded the academy and radical politics in the past few decades, alongside a number of feminist, queer and intersectional critiques of the control, management and production of bodies which in large part remain at the level of acknowledgement of a predicament rather than engaging in close historicisations; that is, which remain at the level of simple abstraction as outlined above. Yes, we are bodies, obviously, and no, ‘we do not want to be governed like that’, in Foucault’s well-known phrase.

Notable in such a ‘domestication’ of Foucault’s thesis of biopolitics is the bracketing of his own close historicisations, from the attention to capitalist requirements of labour discipline in *Discipline and Punish, Madness and Civilisation*,¹⁹ or the emergence of ‘the body’ and ‘bodies’ as a terrain of class antagonism in nineteenth-century Europe in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*:

There is little question that one of the primordial forms of class consciousness is the affirmation of the body, at least this was the case for the bourgeoisie during the 18th century. It converted the blue blood of the nobles into a sound organism and a healthy sexuality. One understands why it took such a long time and was so unwilling to acknowledge that other classes had a body and a sex—precisely those classes it was exploiting. ... Conflicts were necessary (in particular, conflicts over urban space: cohabitation, proximity, contamination, epidemics, such as the cholera outbreak of 1832, or again, prostitution and venereal diseases) in order for the proletariat to be granted a body and a sexuality.²⁰

From an assertion of eugenic and social supremacy – the fitness to reproduce – the body nowadays seems to behave more legibly as a cipher for deprivation, and, in its declinations as ‘surplus population’ or ‘wageless life’,²¹ it comes to stand in for the failure of reproduction as a survival strategy. Rather than the ‘Body-without-Organs’ of Deleuze and Guattari, as a vector of liberation de-linked from the natural teleologies of biological function and self-containment, there is something residual about the body figured thus. Bodies gathering in space, which exhibit their vulnerability as a kind of ‘public secret’ of crisis-capitalist ordinariness, seem, at the same time, to be exhibiting an acute loss of

function; a sort of ultimate de-skilling, where neither labour nor political subjectivity can be found to avert the scandal of unsupported existence.

Butler's claim is that it is the melding of individualised, private and embodied troubles into public matters through the appearance of the many in the street which opens up a political space where it had long been foreclosed. The principal argument is that it is the dramatisation of collective vulnerability in this appearing – a set of structural vulnerabilities made literal by physically coming to and remaining in public spaces mediated by the violence of ownership, policing and damaged social relations, not to mention weather – that is the ground of the political. It is the sheer fact of 'bodies assembling' and making themselves visible, audible, impossible to ignore, prior to and constitutively in excess of any particular or general political demand. Thus, it is 'induced precarity' – a category which has latterly supplanted more prosaic terms such as 'capitalism' in Butler's vocabulary – that brings people together. In a sort of Heideggerian equality of 'being-towards-death', equally precarious, equally exposed, bodies themselves assemble, setting the scene for a new solidarity of precarity – an alliance of weakness, an equal and indivisible interest in improving their conditions of survival.

It is the very irreducibility of this ontological precarity of being a body among other bodies that, for Butler, prevents the conception from being re-routed into, as already noted, parts of the political spectrum less palatable to emancipatory, radically democratic desires. In her account, nationalist forms of togetherness need the minimal dualism of a 'people' who will affirm their collective strength against both a treacherous or absent sovereign and the invaders, as in her example of Pegida's slogan, recycled from East German anti-systemic movements of the 1980s, 'We are the people'.²² An assembly of bodies, on the other hand, is impervious to such chauvinism, since it is predicated on weakness, although questions would still linger about whether the line between these identifications is quite so decisive as Butler implies, and whether 'bodies' can be said to constitute a type of identification at all.

Is anomie combined anomie overcome? Such a delineation of an unmediated vulnerability whose power stems from the sheer fact of coming together has a clarifying effect when considering the power of mass movements *as a mass*, in the way Marx describes the extra power and ability generated by the co-operation of many workers in a factory. But, as with Joshua Clover's periodisation of 'riots' as the ideal-typical form of revolutionary practice in the present,²³ this vision of a no-demands movement has a very circumscribed historical purchase, perhaps beginning in 2009, with the university occupations on the West Coast, and concluding with Occupy in 2011. The 'movements of the squares' fit it to a degree, though there the situation could be better described as a proliferation rather than absence of demands. It would be a stretch, however, to describe the itinerary of the past decade – ongoing insurrection in Hong Kong, Chile and Lebanon, the student strikes in Quebec, the movements of Palestinians against the separation wall, Black Lives Matter, or Extinction Rebellion, to cite just a few of the most-publicised recent instances of street politics – as primarily about the congregation of vulnerable and dependent bodies as a form of suasion to an uncaring capital and state. Moreover, bodily exposure, understood as a norm-breaking rather than norm-affirming practice, can be quite a truculent approach – just ask the rural women protesters in Nigeria's Igboland who halted the construction of an oil terminal in 2002 in part by means of this long-established tactic, a tactic that has been applied in multiple contexts where exposure is seen as an act of defiance rather than appeal.²⁴

Vulner-ability?

The currency of bodies risks getting 'dis-embodied', or at least de-contextualised, if we stop at the borders of Butler's own recent trajectory and do not attend to its embedding in a larger sphere of reference and a 'common sense' on the liberal and progressive left, one which looks for both authenticity and popular political traction in the idiom of vulnerability. A new political realism announces itself here: a realism of the fragile, suffering body. As Robin D.G. Kelley has recently noted, the vulnerable body becomes a cipher of sorrow

or, alternatively (in the white imagination), threat, which is made to ‘increasingly stand in for actual people with names, experiences, dreams, and desires.’²⁵ Kelley suggests that the idiom of ‘bodies’ is not one that enhances concreteness and mutual understanding but that it is metaphysical, or fosters metaphysical explanations for everyday experience; one which Asad Haider has compared to ‘afro-pessimist’ theory’s postulate of a universal, that is, ahistorical and planetary ‘antiblackness’.

The lexicon of ‘bodies’ is now widespread enough to have become prevalent in cultural and art institutional spaces, particularly ones that wish to immunise themselves against a more reflexive and, presumably, discomfiting inquiry into their own elite conditions of possibility, and related issues of constitutive exclusion. Exemplary here, in an artworld context, is when documenta 14 curator Adam Szymczyk notes that the political salience of refugees registers as ‘those who have nothing but their bodies’, and who exert a call on representational strategies in the art field to once more turn to ‘realism ... as dealing with facts of biological and individual existence, with people who are suffering here and now from some kind of trauma or oppression.’²⁶ Szymczyk is interested in bodies as sites of inscription or bodies as signs, as emblems of a geopolitical crisis. If migratory movements are seen as composed of desperate masses travelling with ‘nothing but their bodies’, why not a ‘Parliament of Bodies’ as a suitable allegory for austerity-stricken times when politics has definitely ‘failed’, turning into a stand-off between a property-less ‘rabble’ and the police?²⁷

A rhetorical nod to these and other outcasts from neoliberal security is the kind of gesture which is now habitual for the global institutions of contemporary art and which was reflected more controversially in the last documenta’s double location in Kassel and in Athens. In turn, Kuo notes that Szymczyk’s title is in pointed contrast to the ‘thing-orientation’ of other trends in recent theory, such as Bruno Latour’s 2005 ‘Parliament of Things’. Here, the invocation of ‘bodies’ suggests that politics have been invited back into an arena of fetishism in a gesture partaking as much of constitution as of pathos, with the hope of

sublating the polarisations of the situation of holding the documenta in Athens in an overall attention to the vulnerability that equally connects all bodies. Again, it is the projection of a political collectivity united by the sheer fact of exposure to harm (a strikingly uniform one, here), in other words, the undialectically biopolitical nature of this notion of bodies, which both takes power – Parliament – and evacuates power in the same moment, turning to appeal to a protective sovereign in the common fact of humiliating weakness – or to one another’s empathy, undivided by antagonisms of property, race, gender or legal status. As the artist Jonas Staal, notes, in a paraphrase of Butler, ‘This means that the collective gathering of bodies in the form of an assembly is an inherent act of resistance against the lack of care that a given regime provides to these bodies.’ ²⁸

The terminology of ‘bodies’ seems almost unimaginable as a simple abstraction, given its address to immediacy and direct experience of the world *on one’s skin*. Yet this is perhaps why it functions so adroitly as such an abstraction, in turn making the relation between experience and the pervasive social abstractions of contemporary capitalist life unimaginable, if all experience is direct and the somatic is immediately, indeterminately political. The only mediation whose presence is still desirable, it seems, is that of the art institution. But the disavowal of mediation in favour of the insistent, ‘inherent resistance’ of needs can be said to raise the question of realism in another key.

Political ‘realism’ has an unsavoury reputation in the history of the left, but it does come into the picture any time the exceptionally durable but reality-deficient supposition that equates the urgency of needs and the triggering of revolutionary social change is invoked. Such a ‘functionalism’ or ‘economism’ is the most characteristic guise of the rejection of political mediation in the history of the revolutionary left and its theoretical engagements in favour of a unilinear determinism that sustains neither historical nor conceptual scrutiny. At the same time, a history of reflection on the notion of ‘need’ as a social concept in critical thought, as already noted above, is long overdue. ²⁹ The simple abstraction of ‘need in general’ can be paralleled to the self-evidence of

'bodies' (in general) as an elision of the specifically social (or, as Marx put it, 'historical and moral') determination of the 'most pressing, most undeniable', specifically in an era when algorithmic governance and untrammelled extraction across the social, cognitive and ecological spectrum means that the needs of capital to valorise, and that of humans and other life to survive, come to seem nearly inextricable in practice, if absolutely opposed in fact.

Returning to Butler, we can note that even if bodies are perceived as relational to infrastructures of care and reproduction, this relationality is politically valuable insofar as it is a source of dependency, not a source of power or of antagonism. These fundamentally biological units seem to have no political dimension besides this dependency, much less conflicting interests. Although significantly outside the parameters of the intentions of Butler and other advocates for a politics of vulnerability, there are relevant overlaps here with the field of 'humanitarian reason' which has been subject to various critiques over the past several decades. Accused of de-politicisation, or, at best a managerial, technocratic or solution-oriented politics, analysis of international human rights-driven approaches to crisis means engaging with the politics of management on the global scale, through its interfaces in the NGO complex and how it manages the 'bare lives' of those excluded from political subjectivity through their established status as permanently on the brink of death and needing to be rescued.

An inquiry into the origin of the lexicon of 'bodies' in the radical political and cultural imagination discloses multiple origins, and human rights discourses should not be left out of the picture. Didier Fassin observes on this point that 'Humanitarian reason pays more attention to the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence.'³⁰ It is a short step from bracketing the political subjectivity of precarious bodies, inasmuch as they can present any demands that posit a form of collective subjectivity, whether propositional or antagonistic or both, which cannot be re-routed back through those bodies as

their ultimate source of authority, to bracketing the political subjectivity and social relations of populations displaced by conflict the better to 'save' their precarious lives. How this biopolitical suspension of any life but that of administered bareness works in the context of truth and reconciliation processes is engaged by the legal scholar Josh Bowsler, who suggests that the neoliberal imperative of risk management forms the common thread between the 'passive victim' and the 'entrepreneurial subject'.³¹

How do you recognise a productive body?

So far, I have been concerned to pursue a dual-track inquiry into how 'bodies' are produced as a critical and discursive category, as well as what produces 'bodies' as a kind of non-universal universality that can be made to resonate across difference, precisely to the detriment of all political or ontological universalisms. In this final section, I will emphasise the latter – what produces bodies, and how bodies are made to produce.

The body, in the singular as in the plural, as a talisman of political performativity in a political and existential context characterised by individualisation, by individualised risk, and hence appearing as a 'simple aggregate' of precarity, is not simply a problem for thought, and its translations into ethical and aesthetic registers with equivocal implications. As already discussed, narratives which prioritise abstractions such as bodies and their needs are impelled by an *anti-abstracting* desire in the hope of arriving at something properly urgent and undeniable, without having to take the detour through subjectivity or antagonism. In this they rehearse, from the anti-authoritarian left, Foucault's account of the emergence of biopolitics as population management by the state, and all management as ineradicably biopolitical. But their focus on the demands of individuals before the state for the conditions which would allow them to have 'liveable lives' contains an important kernel of truth.

Capitalism is of course composed of isolated bodies, in production, in consumption, in reproduction. The body as a unit of labour power, that peculiar commodity which one both has and is, and one which, like any commodity, is in competition with all other commodities, comes in for consideration here. Biopolitics is an important reference for another reason; though Foucault has intermittently appeared in this analysis, it is in the mostly unheralded early 1970s work of Francois Guéry and Didier Deleule, *The Productive Body*, that the modern idiom of the body emerges as a naturalising, symptomatic one – one that is mediated by capitalist social relations such as the division of labour and the competition of capitals.³² Guéry and Deleule's ideas are elaborated as a singular fusion of Marx and Foucault,³³ and set out from the start in polemical dialogue with Althusser, specifically with his division between ideology and science, and his concept of interpellation. Rather than focusing on how a cop's interception creates the subject, Guéry is more interested in how private property creates a cop with the right to intercept.

Guéry and Deleule's text, published initially as two separate essays, and translated in 2014 as one volume, extends commodity fetishism to all of society, and specifically to its concept of the body. 'Mind' and 'body' are both seen as reifications of capitalist social and productive relations, separated to create space for management as an agency of subsumption in industrial production. 'The body' is an artefact of individualising social relations produced by capitalist competition, which splits the social body into individualised productive bodies, and by real subsumption, which amplifies the division between mental and manual labour:

As workers become easier to hire and fire, they are increasingly compelled to compete against one another and to consent to work for less money than others. This competition makes it seem to workers that they do not belong to a class or "social body," but must rely on their individual self or "biological body." Hence the "productive body" that has been created initially in the factory makes the biological body seem more important than the social body. As the work process becomes segmented, structural forces lead workers to begin to see themselves in terms of individual rather than group interests and demands.³⁴