

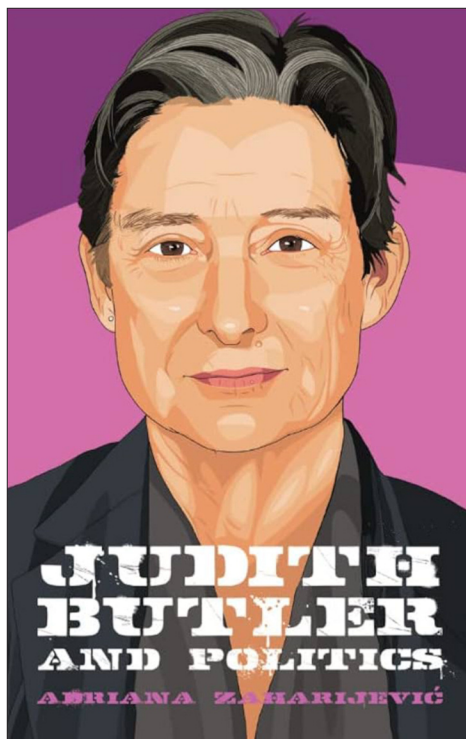


ADRIANA ZAHARIJEVIĆ:  
Judith Butler and Politics  
*Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 248 p.*

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While lives are being destroyed in wars and “massively banished from possibilities” under the neoliberal order (Zaharijević, 2023b: 45), illiberalism is on the rise feeding on the anxieties building on the pillars of family, nation and religion (Grzebalska, Pető, 2017). At the moments of destruction and increasing insecurity of lives, reading Butler’s work through the lens of political imagination becomes “a more than necessary requirement” (Zaharijević, 2023a: vi). Adriana Zaharijević in her book *Judith Butler and Politics*, offers such reading capturing the interplay of philosophy and politics in an impressive overview of Butler’s thoughts. For Zaharijević, Butler’s philosophy can be grasped as an insurrection at the level of ontology politically directed to engage in a struggle against violence. As an alternative to the liberal versions of ontology, the book traces a new social ontology of the body fostering a radical egalitarian imaginary. Indeed, following their work, Zaharijević positions the body as the key link between the presumed distinct theories of performativity and precarious life. Although Zaharijević structures the book chronologically according to these two phases of Butler’s thoughts building on four concepts of performativity, agency, livable life and non-violence, she constantly provides connections to keep the bodily ontology in the centre. I find this arrangement of the book useful to follow also for the review.

In the first part of the book, dedicated to the theory of performativity, Zaharijević mainly focuses on Butler’s philosophical endeavours before 2001. She demonstrates that body and norms are key pillars of performativity composed of double movement – acting and being acted upon by the norms. Body engages in everyday corporal acts reiterating the norms which manage interpretative possibilities constructing a boundary between what is legible and illegible. Re-enacting available gender norms in a “proper” way serves bodies to become knowable, real and counted as life, while bodies that perform the norm “improperly” become unknowable or monstrous. Zaharijević highlights that for Butler “body functions as the junction of cultural interpretations, as a site of socially mediated interactions” (Zaharijević, 2023a: 55), by which she creates insightful linkage bringing the sociality of bodies from latter work into view. Hence, instead of radical determinism and voluntarism, the book turns to reading performativity as a theory of agency and subject based on social constitution. For Butler subject is in a continuous process of becoming, being constituted through its repetitive acts materializing the norms at the



disposal. Although repetitions of acts occur under the constraint of the power field, at the same time they create space for resisting the same powers and norms that constitute the subject. Hence, agency understood by Butler as the reiterative practice is conditioned but not fully constrained by power relations. In this way, new possibilities can be produced through the act. Zaharijević emphasizes the social stakes of acting which always bears collective quality, enabling acting bodies to be part of a collective struggle. In this way, the book views the theory of performativity as part of insurrection at the level of ontology calling for social transformation and emancipation of bodies in a struggle against violence.

The question of “what makes for a liveable life” of bodies (Zaharijević, 2023a: 137) leads readers to the second part of the book reflecting on Butler’s work since the 9/11 attack and “war on terror”.

This section deals with the unequal

liveability and grievability of lives and fully flashes out Butler’s bodily ontology with ethico-political demand of non-violence to persist in cohabitation. While some lives are liveable and recognized as human, the jettisoned lives do not satisfy the “norms of humanness” (Zaharijević, 2023b: 46) and are kept in a state of increased precarity and dispossession. In the language of Butler, these are unrecognized lives “whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (Butler, 2016: 24). Nevertheless, for Butler, the affective response of grief over loss has also the power to expose the sociality, relationality and vulnerability of bodies which can lead us to different political imagination consisting of radical equality of grievability. In opposition to liberal versions of ontology based on individualism and self-sufficiency, Zaharijević presents Butler’s philosophy as an alternative social ontology centred on bodies that share the general condition of precariousness and vulnerability to loss and insecurity. As all lives are social beings bounded by the lives of others, the social ontology places emphasis on the state of interdependence in which we are obligated and responsible to protect other lives. In an allied struggle, literature on ethics of care places caring into the focus of politics highlighting the necessity of acknowledgement of relationality when laying down caring claims (Tronto, 2013). What Butler demands in nexus with politics of interdependency is nonviolent performativity preserving the cohabitation of bodies in their plurality. Tying together the theory of performativity, precarious life and nonviolence the book’s concluding chapter brings to the forefront the call for insurrection at the level of ontology to remake the reality of *our place* of plural bodies based on interdependent and non-violent bind.

It is hard to be critical of a book which takes the readers on the philosophically political journey with Butler to “rebel against the reality that constitutes us” and call for radical equality (Zaharijević, 2023a: 225). From the early start, Zaharijević communicates the innovative reading of Butler’s thoughts as an insurrection at the level of ontology which also acts as a helpful lens on which readers can rely when diving into the identified core pillars of Butler’s thoughts. Although when reading Butler’s work the political side of insurrection “emerges out of the text itself; it appears and challenges in medias res” (Zaharijević, 2023a: 2), Zaharijević brings the insurrection into view for the readers in a more compact frame. She positions Butler’s bodily ontology as an alternative to the liberal versions of ontology while creating a continuous link among Butler’s theories through the demand that all bodies matter. Indeed, the constant creation of linkages is a key feature of Zaharijević’s piece. For instance, Zaharijević disputes that violence is a newer topic in Butler’s thoughts tracing its variety from normative violence to the idea of vulnerability and non-violence. Finding similarities among Butler’s different works is complemented by the careful construction of links to other authors. “Thinking with others” (Zaharijević, 2023a: 5) is a strong side of the book showing how Butler evolves their conceptualizations in connection to other authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Hegel, Gayle Rubin, Monique Wittig, Foucault, Agamben sometimes agreeing, building upon them, other times challenging their interpretations.

One connection among the texts I would be interested in examining even more is the role of affect. Zaharijević states grief was already present in the margins of the earlier texts when discussing Antigone. Is there more to explore in the trajectory of affect in Butler’s philosophical endeavours? Moreover, as a reader, I would like to learn more about the story behind the book and its author. What is the author’s history with Butler’s work? What was the process of writing the book? Zaharijević mentions the book has been partially translated based on her previous work in Serbian language. In her recent article, she even reflects on how feminists in the Eastern European context read and translated Butler’s work (Zaharijević, 2024). Hence, greater contextualization of her reading of Butler within her positionality and the role of cultural translation could be a valuable addition to the introduction of the book.

*Judith Butler and Politics* offers a stimulating review of Butler’s work in light of their struggle to reduce violence. Reading Butler’s work as the insurrection at the level of ontology composed of philosophical and political commitment to rethinking the real and taking action represents an important contribution to understanding their work in broader demand for social transformation towards a liveable world. The thread of the body successfully carries this call sewing different parts of Butler’s thoughts together. This book can be beneficial material for students and teachers in social sciences making Butler’s work more accessible but also for scholars dealing with the topics of liveability, inequality and precarity and activists taking part in the remaking of *our place*.

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ZUZANA PANCZOVÁ, GABRIELA KILIÁNOVÁ, TOMÁŠ KUBISA:  
Národopis na Slovensku v službách Tretej ríše  
[Ethnography in Slovakia in the Service of the Third Reich]  
Volkskunde in den Diensten des Dritten Reiches. Deutsche  
Forscher und Forscherinnen in der Slowakei  
[Ethnography in Slovakia in the Service of the Third Reich.  
German Researchers in Slovakia]  
*Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, Marenčin PT, Bratislava*  
2021, 195 p. Lit Verlag, Münster, 2023, 196 p.<sup>1</sup>

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Compared to Czech historiography, our Slovak colleagues have produced numerous works, including several monographs, which map the history of domestic ethnography and ethnology. Thanks to the reviewed publication, this now extends to the previously overlooked period of World War II. According to the authors, this book should be seen as a significant Slovak contribution to the discussion on the institutional and personal forms of the ideological use of ethnography and related disciplines by Nazi Germany in the 1940s, particularly in terms of its foreign policy plans. Special attention is given to clarifying the ideological context of ethnographic research on the German minority

<sup>1</sup> This review was originally published in the Slovak language version of Slovenský národopis 1/2023 (pp. 88–90). Given that the publication has been reissued in German, we are pleased to offer this book review to our international readers. The German edition of the book, titled *Volkskunde in den Diensten des Dritten Reiches: Deutsche Forscher und Forscherinnen in der Slowakei* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2023), was awarded in the category of top scientific monographs by the Slovak Academy of Sciences Board in September 2024 (editor's note).