

**Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, Fordham University Press, 2015, pp. 208, \$ 24.95, ISBN 9780823264674**

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*Senses of the subject*, the new volume written by Judith Butler and published by Fordham University Press, was defined by J. M. Bernstein as “echt Butler: a necessity for those who already know her work, and a generous point of entry for those philosophers who have yet to find their way to her thought.”

This volume presents an array of philosophical essays written over a period of twenty years, recording the shifts of the author’s view on various questions concerning the subject. The book as a whole constitutes a precious instrument for approaching the main questions of gender studies and a preferential way of understanding the political conception of the subject proposed by Butler - first and foremost because the seven articles, re-published and collected here, are now made more accessible - a fact which allows readers to appreciate how her thinking has evolved and changed over the years. The essays included in *Senses of the subject* also represent, as Butler observes, less known (and less popular) dimensions of her philosophical work and may be divided into three groups.

Butler writes in the *Introduction* that “in the work on Malebranche in relation to Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard, Descartes, and Hegel”, she is “perhaps concerned more with the relational dimensions of embodiment: passion, desire, touch” (p.11) and, as we shall see, these essays are the more theoretical ones in the volume.

In “*How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?*”(pp.17-35), Butler explores the role played by the body in Descartes’s philosophy by analysing the *Meditations* and the Cartesian theory of imagination, and points out that “the effort to excise the body fails because the body returns, spectrally, as a figural dimension of the text.” (p.32)

In the essay *Merleau-Ponty and the touch of Malebranche* (pp.36-62), Butler proposes insights into the influence of Malebranche on Merleau-Ponty, specifically as regards the concept of the body and its relation to impressions, focusing on the constitutive process of the “I”, defined as a subject capable of touch who is touched at the same time.

As can also be seen in *Subjects of Desire* and *Antigone's Claims*, for Butler Hegel is a constant source of reference. In the essay *To Sense What Is Living in the Other: Hegel's Early Love* (pp.90-111), she analyses the role played by the concept of love in Hegelian philosophy.

The essay *Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair* (pp.112-148) is devoted to an analysis of Kierkegaard's interpretation of Hegel, to his view of the self and of despair, "that passion that can never be 'synthesized' by the Hegelian subject" (p.114) and which is "the result of the effort to overcome or solve the paradox of human existence"(p.123).

The problem of the body and the question of the relationship between embodiment and the subject is present in every essay, but the links to feminism and gender studies can be found especially in *Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty* (pp.149-170). Here, Butler analyses the ethical relation between the sexes proposed by Luce Irigaray and examines her interpretation of the final chapter of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, a work considered by Irigaray as an example of monologic masculinism.

The essays which reveal some of Butler's political commitments are *The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics under Pressure* and *Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon*. In the former, the author analyses Spinozian ethics, which has for her "implications for social solidarity and a critique of individualism" (p.63), and focuses on the Spinozian concepts of self-preservation, desire and life. Exploring Deleuzian, psychoanalytic and Levinas' various readings of Spinoza's view of the "desire to live", she searches for possibilities for social ethics emerging from his view, in order to conceive a political community in which desiring life means desiring, and producing, the political conditions of life for every precarious body.

In her second essay, Butler analyses Sartre's controversial preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. She focuses attention on those to whom this preface was addressed: European readers, assumed by Sartre as white and male. She goes on to examine the role of violence in colonial domination, specifically as regards the constitution of the subject, suggesting that if "you" took the place of "man" in the dialogue between the colonised and the colonisers, we would have a "new

conception of the human where some manner of touch other than violence is the precondition of that making”. (p.197)

As the title suggests, the object of this volume is the question of the subject (“I”) and how it is formed. If asked what rationalises this collection, Butler would probably answer (as she writes in the useful and explicative *Introduction*) that “when we speak about the subject formation, we invariably presume a threshold of susceptibility or impressionability that may be said to precede the formation of a conscious and deliberate ‘I’. That means only that this creature that I am is affected by something outside of itself, understood as prior, that activates and informs the subject that I am.” (p.1). But she also suggests that “I am already affected before I can say ‘I’ and that I have to be affected to say ‘I’ at all.” (p.2)

The questions posed by Butler are therefore the following: is there a relation of primacy between the senses and “I”? And what are the conditions allowing for the emergence of the subject and of its agency? This consideration for Butler is extremely important if “we are to understand ourselves as agentic at all.” In fact, “the task is to think of being acted on and acting as simultaneous, and not only as a sequence.” (p.6)

For Butler, the subject is never simply composed of norms, nor ever fully self-forming. In addition, the process of constitution of “I” is not only based on its relationship with other humans but is in the “‘hands’ of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human”. (p.7)

Although the subject is affected and formed by social and discursive powers, its agency and action are not nullified: the relation with alterity, being acted by others (humans and non-human factors) makes us become beings with the capacity to sense things and to act. For Butler, no-one transcends the matrix of relations which gives rise to the subject, and no-one can act without being formed as one with the capacity for so doing. For these reasons, in Butler's thinking, the ethical dimension assumes crucial importance, and readers can find here the key to understanding this aspect of her philosophy.

### **Websites**

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