
Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2024)

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Who's Afraid of Gender? is an ambitious and well-constructed book that employs rigorous logic and rational language to explore the correlation between “gender ideology” and contemporary radical anti-gender movements. The persuasive rhetoric of public figures fuels the anti-gender movement in today's world, aiming to eliminate reproductive justice, weaken protections against sexual and gender-based violence, and deprive transgender and queer individuals of the freedom to live without fear of violence. Judith Butler, a highly respected scholar in feminist theory and gender studies, vividly examines how the concept of “gender” has become a spectre that channels the fears of destruction propagated by right-wing movements, institutions, states, and gender-critical feminists.

In asking “Who is afraid of gender?”, Butler examines the way in which trans-exclusionary feminists, fascist and emerging authoritarian regimes have turned gender into a phantasm. To address these questions, Butler adopts Jean Laplanche's¹ theoretical formulation of fantasy as a phantasmatic scene. For Laplanche, fantasy is not merely a mental construct, but a systematic arrangement of desire and anxiety structured by principles that draw from both unconscious and conscious sources. Butler expands on this idea, arguing that condensation and displacement play significant roles in the syntax of fantasy. Condensation is the process of condensing the existing social issues into a singular fear of gender. Economic depression, ecological damage, and political corruption can all be summarily attributed to gender issues. Displacement means replacing the fear of the loss of national purity and the decline of patriarchal power and the elimination of white supremacist ideology with the fear of gender, which obscures the true intention of right-wing politicians to maintain a hierarchical order. To put it in another way, by condensation and displacement, the constituents of the world's makeup are rearranged, leading to the demonisation of gender through the anxiety of instability and the fear of replacement. These mechanisms, Butler argues, enable the anti-gender movement to instil fear and anxiety by presenting “gender” as a simplified and threatening construct.

Who's Afraid of Gender? begins with an analysis of the Vatican's anti-gender rhetoric and the rapid global expansion of this movement (Chapters 1 and 2). The Vatican, where the concept of

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¹ Laplanche was a French psychoanalyst who gained fame for his work on Sigmund Freud's seduction theory. Butler references in the book, for example, Jean Laplanche, ‘The Other Within: Rethinking Psychoanalysis’, interview in *Radical Philosophy* 102 (July/August 2000). On Laplanche's work, see further John Fletcher and Nicholas Ray (eds.) *Seductions and Enigmas: Cultural Readings with Laplanche* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2014).

“gender ideology” first emerged, views “gender” as fixed and complementary, which means gender should be fixed from birth as man or woman, but marriage must be restricted to heterosexuals. Gender is rooted in natural law and the divine order established by God. From this perspective, those advocating for gender fluidity and self-determination are seen as defying the authority of God and are perceived as disruptive forces akin to dangerous weapons. Hence, the Vatican portrays “gender” as a false doctrine that opposes divine power. Butler critiques this stance, exposing the Vatican’s claim to ideological supremacy under the guise of anti-ideology.

Butler argues that the concept of “gender” is not merely a belief, but rather a “hardwired” theory that encompasses a human’s inherent right to freedom, offering a framework for philosophical exploration and dialogue. They further demonstrate how metaphors are used to create widespread fear of gender, illustrating how the Vatican’s global collaboration strategy with states amplifies this fear. According to Butler, this rhetoric ties gender to the deprivation of the divinity of the family (challenges its heteronormativity) and the authority of nation (challenges its racial purity), transforming it from a value-neutral academic term into a political tool through which conservatives instill fear. They contend that the metaphor of gender serves as a scapegoat, concealing the deeper causes of the world’s precarious state. In the view of Butler, to inhabit a gender is to live out a certain historical moment that becomes possible for the lives we live now. Gender cannot be simply a phantasm, not only because gender is constructed over time in the historical evolution of social institutions, but also because gender comes along with vulnerability, agency, dependency, illness, social recognition, basic requirements, shame, passion, sexuality, and variable conditions of life and aliveness (p.29). However, by portraying gender rights advocates as scapegoats for societal decline, the anti-gender movement obliterates the inherent complexity of gender and unjustly holds them responsible for the world’s faltering. By inciting anti-gender people's fear of destruction and transforming this fear into a moral alibi for destroying other people's lives, authoritarianism reignites fascist passions, which establish the dispensability of lives. This process exacerbates gender vulnerability by erasing gender complexity.

Interestingly, Butler addresses a core issue in legal philosophy: the positivist versus non-positivist debate on whether law should reflect morality. Under the influence of the anti-gender movement, some states have enacted laws depriving queer, trans, and feminist youth of access to education about gender, race, and racism. For Butler, these laws are unequivocally wrong because “they intensify marginalization and undermine the very possibility of pursuing a liveable life” (p.92). They support a non-positivist perspective, arguing that these laws act as a “moral alibi, an inversion, the kind that lets moral sadism flourish” (p.92). They further elaborate:

The law can become abusive by identifying abuse as what it opposes; the law can assault lives by imagining the affected lives as assaulting the family; the law can even murder, or let die, when it decides that certain lives are so corrosive or destructive that exposing them to lethal violence, unprotected, is justified (p.92).

While Butler convincingly critiques these laws, the question of whether their injustice stems solely from their moral alibi remains open to debate. Comparing these laws to fascist fanaticism highlights historical parallels but does not adequately elaborate the moral soundness. Although Butler does not delve deeply into this issue, it remains a rich area of inquiry for legal scholars exploring the relationship between morality and law.

The book then examines the recent anti-gender ideology in the United States (Chapters 3 and 4). Butler uses the current debates in the United States as a starting point to illustrate how the state invests in a fantasy of restoring patriarchal power through restrictions on healthcare and censorship in education. These censorship campaigns target not only feminist literature but also materials addressing race, slavery, and the Holocaust. Words dealing with the question of “gender” are now perceived as so threatening that state-backed authorities wield them as tools to manipulate and control, framing them as weapons of moral and social corruption.

Butler also discusses how the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*² has curtailed reproductive autonomy, creating inequality. By prioritising the protection of the foetus over bodily autonomy, the state denies individuals the freedom to make reproductive choices, assuming authority over their bodies and extending patriarchal control.

The anti-gender ideology movement has not taken a single form as it appears in different regions and countries. In central Europe, for example, anti-gender movements in countries such as Poland and Hungary are associated with the Catholic Church, while in the US, they are spawned by Evangelical political formations. However, in the UK, such movements are less prevalent in civil society and more strongly reflected in academic debates. (Chapter 5) The internecine fight among feminist and trans scholars and activists in the UK appears to be particularly fractious compared to other countries.³ Currently, the disputes between feminists identifying as gender critical and those advocating for the inclusion of trans and genderqueer individuals in feminist alliances have escalated into a significant public conflict. Gender critical feminists hold the view that “women are a sex caste, and...sex oppression [is] a distinct and important axis of oppression.”⁴ To put it another way, the distinction between the two camps appears to be centered on the question of who is considered a woman or a man, as well as what they refer to as the “matter” of sex, a term that consistently invokes the body and the issues it presents.⁵

Butler argues that the claim held by gender critical feminists that anti-gender politics is not their central focus is a fallacy, as their critique fails to re-examine the issue of sex or offer a fresh

² *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) was a landmark Supreme Court decision in which the Court ruled that the Constitution of the United States generally protected a right to have an abortion.

³ See for example Sandra Duffy (2023) ‘Postcolonial Dynamics in Pro- and Anti-Trans Activism in the United Kingdom and Ireland’, *feminists@law* 12(2).

⁴ Holly Lawford-Smith, *Gender-Critical Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2022) p.25.

⁵ See further, Davina Cooper (2019) ‘A Very Binary Drama: The Conceptual Struggle for Gender’s Future’, *feminists@law* 9(1).

perspective on the world. On the contrary, they contest the mutability of gender and challenge its legitimacy (p.139). For Butler, political authority has been consistently and inextricably linked to gender. Butler then points out that the position held by gender critical feminists perpetuates fear and repression through phantasmatic constructs. More specifically, in the eyes of gender critical feminists, transgender women should not be permitted into women's spaces because women would feel unsafe if there were penises in the room. But this assumption does not discuss why penises are given such power, nor does it question why they are always and only seemingly a potential threat to women. The reason gender critical feminists give for transgender women entering women's spaces is a discriminatory position (p.158). Only when the penis is used as a weapon to trigger mass phantasm and panic does segregation and discrimination seem more reasonable. On the other hand, it is precisely because gender critical feminists believe that their own sexed bodies are being appropriated by nefarious actors, that they refuse the possibility of self-determination as a basis for gender reassignment. By proclaiming that the right to self-determination of gender is an illegitimate exercise of freedom, an overreach from "fake" women, and a sex denial by trans and queer individuals, gender critical feminists generate fear and repression in people. Like the Vatican, these anti-gender feminists weaponise fear to resist gender fluidity and contribute to exclusionary and regressive politics. In fact, Butler argues that feminism has always insisted that "woman" is an open-ended category; a premise that has allowed women to pursue possibilities that were traditionally denied to their sex. The claim made by anti-gender feminists in the UK that being a woman is not a feeling, but a fixed reality, not only limits the possibility of open discussion, but also negates the potential for historical advancement. For as Butler points out, gender categories change through time, and feminism has always relied on the historically changing character of gender categories to demand changes in the way that women and men are defined and treated (p.138). But in the way that anti-gender feminists frame gender as a timeless category, gender could not be redefined. This implies that the definition of "woman" as it formerly existed is immutable and will remain so indefinitely. That would relegate efforts and historical progress made by feminism to oblivion.

Following an analysis of the discourse between gender critical feminists and trans inclusionary feminists in the UK, Butler shifts their emphasis from theory to practice. They then highlight the state's dominant role in controlling healthcare and education around gender issues.⁶ However, they leave some critical questions unaddressed: What are the limits of individual self-determination? If the state should not act as a controller, what role should it play in addressing gender-related issues? Where should the boundaries between state control and individual autonomy lie? These questions, likely to be explored further by legal scholars, remain central to the broader debates on gender and law.

⁶ For example, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (as amended) allows individuals to change their legal gender only if they were treated and approved by a registered psychologist or medical practitioner. See further, Flora Renz, *Gender Recognition and the Law: Troubling Transgender Peoples' Engagement with Legal Regulation* (Routledge, 2024).

In response to the concerns of feminist scholars in the gender critical camp regarding whether biological sex is being erased by the idea of gender identity, Butler offers insights in Chapter 6. As previously mentioned, Butler is not a proponent of positivism. They consistently argue that we should examine the material dimensions of the body within the framework of a multifaceted perception of reality. Reality encompasses not only biological sex but also a multitude of relationships. Therefore, the body is not devoid of life and context, nor is it merely a fact that reinforces preconceived notions about sex. On the contrary, it is a way of questioning the various meanings and established forms of pervasive relationships between sex and gender. More precisely, in legal practice, when judges declare something in a judgment or legal authorities determine which sex people align with, certain truths are eliminated, while others are constructed. For example, as Butler notes, “when one is called male when one is a woman, or vice versa, the calling is an effacement of what one is” (p.184). Clearly, this process of effacement is a form of violence that establishes the boundaries between what is considered living and unliving. Those deemed unliveable consequently have their rights to exist stripped away in the name of legal authority.

By this point, it becomes clear that in Butler’s view, the gender of the body is distinct from the sex assigned at birth. But what determines the body’s gender? Simone de Beauvoir, a key figure in second-wave feminism, famously asserted, “one is not born but becomes a woman.”⁷ Building on this, many feminist scholars, including Gayle Rubin and Butler in their early work,⁸ further developed this discourse. They argue that being assigned female at birth and becoming a woman are distinct paths, and that the former is neither the origin nor the predetermined goal of the latter. While these arguments acknowledge that sex is established through diverse cultural and social methods, they often rely on a nature/culture dichotomy. In Chapter 8, Butler updates their earlier views, again rejecting this dichotomy. They argue that biological sex itself is a result of cultural construction rather than a purely natural fact. Gender is not merely a cultural construction imposed on biological sex; rather, the body itself is a complex combination of social and material interactions. Viewing the body solely as a biological phenomenon risks naturalising it, whereas Butler insists that the body as a concept is shaped by a series of events, discourses, and technologies. Whole societies and cultures are not external to the body but constitute the “stuff from which it is made” (p.33). Butler refers to this framework as co-construction theory, suggesting that the body results from the interaction between society and nature—it is neither independent of nature nor entirely socially constructed. To illustrate this point, Butler uses the example of a human infant. While the infant appears to be a biological being, its survival depends on basic support, which is organised through social and material systems of care (p.211). Biological traits such as breathing, eating, sleeping, and moving require social frameworks to sustain them. This example refutes the nature/culture dichotomy while underscoring Butler’s concern for human vulnerability.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Classics Edition, 1997) p.267.

⁸ Gayle Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’ in Carole Vance (ed) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) chapter 9; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999).

In the final two chapters of the book, Butler explores the correlation between gender and colonisation. The proliferation of the concept of “gender” in non-English-speaking nations, particularly in the Global South, often coincides with the imposition of Western ideology. Butler argues that the ability to translate the English term “gender” into native languages and provide an interpretation that is formulated in the native tongue is a prerequisite for both successful solidarity against the anti-gender ideology movement and international feminism. In order to challenge the term’s monolingual presumptions, they emphasise the importance of research demonstrating how colonial powers imposed a heteronormative binary framework for thinking about gender as binary on the Global South, along with sexological practices rooted in ideals of whiteness. Butler also advocates for exploring potential linguistic alternatives to “gender” in other languages.

Symbols and metaphors permeate this book. At first glance, Butler appears to criticise the contemporary rise of right-wing anti-gender movements as fascist trends. However, their deeper intention is to use these phenomena as a means to discuss the concept of freedom itself. The gender movement serves as a symbol that represents the collective pursuit of freedom, while right-wing political forces use the anti-gender movement to promote authoritarianism. Butler argues, “when we say I want to be free or I want you to be free, we are not only speaking about these distinct selves but also about social freedoms that should be accorded to everyone as long as no real harm is done” (p.260). For this reason, we must unveil conspiracy fascist trends that misrepresent fundamental freedom as implausible threats. If freedom is perceived as detrimental, or if individuals consider the pursuit of freedom to be harmful to society, then in this overcautious attitude, we will be limited, and in this way, we will not be able to learn how to make freedom serve the progress of humankind. Similarly, Butler uses the gender movement as a strategy to restate her theory of human vulnerability.⁹ While the book does not focus on the theory of human vulnerability as such, Butler does provide a concise explanation of her ongoing academic view in the concluding chapter. To think of the anti-gender movement only as a culture war would be too naïve, as the movement in many regions and countries is merely an outward expression of collective insecurities. To be more specific, many individuals perceive their living conditions as deteriorating under neoliberalism, resulting in a state of vulnerability stemming from uncertainty about the future as well as a sense of dislocation in the present. This vulnerability hinders their ability to make sound cognitive judgements, leading them to erroneously seek refuge in the anti-gender movement. Amidst the upheaval of the world, the advocates of the anti-gender movement are as vulnerable as those they oppose. As a philosopher, the culmination of her critique is a deep understanding of and compassion for humanity.

Butler acknowledges that conservative rejection of feminism often stems from the perception that it disrupts social ties, which are essential sources of support. From here, Butler asserts that

⁹ On Judith Butler’s view of vulnerability, see Judith Butler, ‘Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance’ in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (eds) *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Duke University Press, 2016) pp.12-27.

gender is not just a matter of individual identity, and gender politics is not merely identity politics, for its ultimate goal, they argue, is “to create the world in which we all want to live” (p.259). Achieving this goal requires recognizing that individuals are deeply embedded in the social world. The individual body serves as a reflection of social interactions, both explicit and implicit, displaying its interconnectedness and vulnerability. This implies that we, as human beings, must acknowledge that our existence is contingent upon our interconnectedness with others. So, the only way out, for Butler, is to align the fight for gender freedoms and rights with the criticism of capitalism and to articulate the freedoms we strive for as collective objectives. Moreover, they argue for incorporating gender into a broader struggle for a socio-economic environment that eliminates insecurity and guarantees everyone’s access to healthcare, housing, and food in all regions of the Globe (p.260). Indeed, it is by virtue of our interdependency that we stand a chance to survive and flourish. If I am inseparable from you, you become part of me, and we cannot escape our shared existence. Each “I,” or individual, must break down ideological camps and relinquish their “own” context to truly engage with others. Only then can human beings talk about a collective “us.” You are my lost gain. As Butler believes, humanity has always evolved through such interconnectedness.

Given that *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* begins with a Vatican perspective, I would like to conclude this review with a reference to it. For the Vatican, the ideal of self-constitution defies God’s will. While we may dismiss this notion, acknowledging our inability to comprehend God’s will in mortal terms, we have a moral responsibility to protect others’ rights to a liveable life. Safeguarding human life is not a rejection of God’s will, but a manifestation of God’s mercy on earth. The Bible says “do not be afraid” 365 times—a sentiment that Butler echoes. Mimicking the transphobia of the right in the name of feminism and perpetuating phantasms of fear, is senseless (p.133). Confrontation only intensifies conflict and increases vulnerability. What we need is an alliance that acknowledges and strengthens the interdependencies without which we cannot live. To those who are afraid of gender: do not be afraid; to those who are categorised as deviants by those who are afraid of gender: do not be afraid.