POLITICAL THEORY

Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly. by Judith Butler. 2015. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. $27.95.
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— Margaret Kohn, *University of Toronto*

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler revisits her early work on performativity and uses it to illuminate the politics of the street and the plaza. She urges us to think about the political effects that are produced when bodies—not just voices, discourses, or arguments—appear on the public stage. The main thesis of the book is that acting in concert can contest hierarchical distributions of power and the notions of liveability and normality that underpin them. The book, which is based on a series of lectures, links performativity with precarity. Butler focuses on the demonstrations, occupations, and vigils that expose the material body and highlight its need for shelter, food, care, and employment.

Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly is much more than a materialist version of liberal arguments in favor of the right to free speech and assembly. It is a nuanced discussion of a wide range of themes, including gender, precarity, public space, sociality, interdependence, justice, and the human. The book is extremely readable. It maintains the conversational style of the lecture format, which makes it an excellent introduction for students who are new to Butler's work. The focus on the politics of public space also offers new insights to her core audience.

How does the body "speak" politically? It does so in at least two ways. According to Butler, assembled bodies can have a "signifying effect." She notes that even when people stand silently, assembled bodies "say" we are not disposable. This dimension of assembly fits well with the conventional account of political activity, and the legal doctrine of free speech encompasses both speech and symbolic action that expresses dissent. While the courts recognize the expressive content of public assembly, protestors often emphasize the intrinsic value of the practice itself. The Occupy protestors, for example, made signs and issued press releases, but they also set up free "stores" and shared the labor of providing food and care. They enacted alternatives. According to Butler, gathering itself signifies in excess of what is said because it is a plural form of performativity (p. 8).

Another way that the body speaks politically is through exposure (p. 83). Butler draws our attention to the ways that bodies on the street contest and negate existing forms of legitimacy. Transgendered people, veiled women, and homeless people, among others expose and challenge the erasure of their identities simply by appearing in public. She points out that performativity should not be understood primarily as volitional subversion; it also encompasses appearances through which one "freely exercises the right to be who one already is" (p. 61).

This exposure may be driven by agency or necessity, but in both cases it renders the subjects vulnerable to violence. This is one of the reasons why assembly is so important. By coming together in large numbers, individuals are less vulnerable to harm. Concentrating bodies in public space also stages an event, which makes the underlying concerns visible to others. The audience includes people who view it directly and the much larger number whose exposure comes indirectly through media coverage. For Butler, the material and the virtual are interdependent.

Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly is a fairly short but still wide-ranging book. The chapters focus on gender, the politics of the street, precarious life, bodily vulnerability, "we the people," and ethical responsibility in the face of structural injustice. I will focus on two issues that recur throughout the book and that may be of particular interest to political theorists: The first is Butler's reading of Hannah Arendt and the second is normativity.

The book could be read as a dialogue with—or even critique of—Arendt and Arendtianism. Like Arendt, Butler is interested in what becomes possible when people appear and act together in public. In contrast to Arendt, however, Butler is also deeply concerned with the social conditions that enable some people to appear and to act and others to be excluded, invisible, or silenced. She identifies exclusion as part of the structural position of precarity and draws attention to its more extreme physical manifestations—the prison and the way that borders prevent the formation of certain kinds of publics. Butler also rejects Arendt's strong distinction between the social, the private, and the public (p. 44). In fact, the concept of precarity could be read as an attempt to dismantle these categories and show how the fulfillment of or disregard for material needs is intrinsically social and political.

In spite of these differences, Butler also acknowledges her debt to Arendt. Her approach to assembly is inspired by the affirmative vision of public life and freedom in *On Revolution*. At times Butler reads Arendt against the grain to highlight the dimensions of Arendt's work that fit best with Butler's own normative project. For example, Butler notes that for Arendt, "unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence." According to Butler, Arendt builds on this point and derives an obligation "to invest institutions with the demand to seek to make all lives liveable and equally so" (pp. 114–115). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* is lightly footnoted, so it is difficult to pinpoint the textual evidence for this latter claim, but it is hard to reconcile with other passages in *On Revolution* where Arendt treats the goal of making lives equally liveable as an impossible demand that destroys the political. Levinas, the other thinker referenced in the book, seems like a more

promising resource for help theorizing precarity because Levinas's concepts—proximity, alterity, vulnerability, and asymmetry—help us get at what is missing in liberal theories of equality.

According to Butler, politics should be oriented toward the making and preserving of the conditions that allow liveability. Butler's critique of precarity has a lot in common with normative theories that emphasize basic social rights and the need to secure the conditions of human flourishing. Butler's approach shows us how to move beyond an unproductive dichotomy between normative and political or critical approaches to theory. She is unwilling to dismiss ethics and normativity simply because some approaches to these concepts have been normalizing, in the pejorative sense of that term. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* calls for a new norm of liveability that "is not a form of normality" (p. 33). Is that possible? Yes and no. Norms must be normalizing, but they can be understood as both created and discovered and therefore subject to contestation, revision, and re-imagination.

Butler suggests that shared exposure to precarity could be one foundation for equality and reciprocal obligation (p. 218), but of course precarity is not necessarily shared and the privileged have devoted enormous resources to shielding themselves and their families from such exposure. The growth of elite private schools and residential enclaves are just two concrete manifestations of the move away from solidarity and the rejection of even indirect exposure to the lives of others. These strategies are deeply problematic but, at the same time, it is not surprising that they would be embraced by people who live in a society in which precarity is widespread and growing. Can the solidarity generated through the occupation of public space inspire a political movement that weaves a safety net, integrates schools, and equalizes workplaces? This will not be easy, and Butler is right to remind us that words are not enough. To build a new, more liveable way of life, we must enact the very principles we seek to realize (p. 218).

Border Thinking on the Edges of the West: Crossing over the Hellespont. By Andrew Davison. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014. 289p. $145.00.
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Andrew Davison's book is a fascinating read. It is a highly original work, that at times requires some deciphering as to what exactly this project is, but by the end of the book, the reader comes out greatly enlightened on what it means to talk about "borders." Not only does "border thinking" clearly occur, but the author also successfully manages to provide an alternative vision of how to think of a world beyond borders.

Davison is interested, like many other scholars of critical theory (in particular among scholars of globalization, post-colonialism and subaltern studies) in the idea of border and the role it plays in our political conceptions of the world. More specifically, he is interested in "crossing over the border" and the practices that we tend to automatically associate with such a crossing in Western thought. To unpack this, the author turns to ancient classical literature of the Greeks and the Romans, and to texts that are considered landmarks in the development of Western Thought (such as *The History* by Herodotus, *The Peloponnesian War* by Thycydides, *The History of Alexander* by Quintus Curtius Rufus and *Rome and the Mediterranean* by Titus Livy). In using literary and hermeneutical analysis, the author engages in retracing the genealogy of the phrase "border crossing." The book demonstrates quite convincingly that in these narrations, crossing over the border is typically conceptualized as a violent practice, both in the sense that the world on the other side of the border is a place of cruelty and violence, and in the sense that the encounter with this other world will necessary be violent, requiring conquest and subjugation. Most of the focus on this first part of the book is on the critical border of the Hellespont, the thin body of water separating "Europe" from "Asia" what is referred to today as the Dardanelles in modern Turkey. But references to other borders of the "civilized" and/or "Western" world, are also included, such as crossing the Bosphorus, crossing over to Sicilia, crossing over the Alps, and later in the book, crossing over the Taurus mountain range (in Southern modern Turkey). In the large majority of the references to borders, "crossing" implies "crossing with an army" in a form of "expansionist holy war" with most or all of the following elements: army maneuvers, prayer rituals, territorial expansion and an assumption that the other side is inimical (p. 29). A particularly potent part of the analysis concerns the author's claim that this violent conception of border crossing is permanent, and survives—if not constitutes the continuity—between the Greek *polis* (and republican form of government) and the Greek *empire* (unlike the traditional literature that has emphasized the many conceptual shifts begetting the transition from *polis* to *empire*). Actually, Davison goes even further and shows that this early conceptualization of the border as a place of violence and subjugation is one that has travelled through centuries and still fundamentally shapes and permeates the way we think about border crossing today in the West: it is indeed clear that the ethical motivation behind the author decision to investigate this topic was the language surrounding the war in Iraq (and subsequent Western military interventions) in a way that depicted Iraq almost exclusively as a place of violence and subjugation.

The second part of the book turns to providing an alternative to our tendency to think of the border as a place of violence. The style of the text changes here radically, in a way that is both unsettling and inspiring. The goal of the author in these pages is to immerse the