Question: In your reflection you have often referred to Foucault. Do you want to explain how his work has been of paramount importance for you? What are the aspects of his thought that you feel closer and more useful to your reflections and what instead the areas where you most feel a distance from Foucault’s positions? Are there specific junctures of Foucault’s work that you find produce an impasse for your reflections?

Judith Butler: In the 1980s it was clearly the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* that was most important for me, since it gave me a way to understand the clustering of various sexual and gendered functions under the category of “sex” but also to show how repressive discourse produces and proliferates sexuality. We were all quite amazed by that analysis, even though some intimations of that could be found in Freud already. But perhaps most important for me was Foucault’s brief discussion of homosexuality as a “reverse-discourse”. It was important to understand that no matter how pathologizing original discourse on homosexuality had been, reversing that pathologization could be the point of a newer homosexual or gay/lesbian discourse. The point was not to convert a negative value into a positive one, but to produce a field of new values. Surely, we are living in such a time when that is actively happening.

I was certainly interested in the way the body and soul were described in *Discipline and Punish*, but I was sorry to see the lack of a sexual dimension in the analysis of incarceration. I probably took a break from Foucault for a while, but became interested again when I finally had access to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and then a series of lectures on *parrhesia* and on the relationship between speech and truth. I found the last lectures quite engaging, and they have helped me both to think about the interlocutory conditions of autobiography, but also the way in which political speaking works.
Question: In the essay *Giving an Account of Oneself*, you insist on the impossibility to give a full account of oneself; from this impossibility you gesture towards an ethics that builds on a constitutive insatisfaction, that is an ethics postulating that the other cannot either give an account of himself/herself: “In a sense, the ethical stance consists [...] in asking the question ‘Who are you?’ and continuing to ask it without any expectation of a full or final answer”\(^1\). In other essays you analyse some claims by Foucault and Arendt where the philosophical claim is staged in a way that allows for it to be suggested but denied or not fully embraced at the same time. Do you think there is a connection between these two perspectives, i.e. the one from *Giving an Account of Oneself* and the one in the essays about Foucault and Arendt? Does the philosophical discourse need in some sense to be conveyed by “not fully giving an account of oneself”?

*Judith Butler*. It seems clear to me that the speaking subject in Arendt is one who both appears and acts in public, and this is done with and for others. So it is not a scene of an individual alone, but rather a scene of address. This is certainly close to the forms of self-exposition or demonstration that Foucault talks about in his essays on medieval modes of self-constitution. Neither of these subjects is primarily offering a story or narrative account of what they have done, or why. They are rather appearing as a speaking being who is producing effects, constituting the self, and transfiguring the scene of address in which they appear. Foucault moves away from confession, as we know, and also the presumption that it is a judge or psychiatric representative of the police force to whom we have to make our story known. There is a power in speech, and it the capacity for self-constitution and self-care that exceeds the bounds of the scene of interrogation and judgment.

For Arendt, the situation is different only because Eichmann is so central to her reflections on this issue. In that case, however, she is less interested in a psychological or biographical account of why he has done what he has done, but only that he has done it, and that he be told, quite clearly, that his acts constitute crimes against humanity. She savors judgment, whereas Foucault does not. But for her, judgment has a Kantian

dimension that is bound up with aesthetics, and so judgment is an active exercise of autonomy. Eichmann lacked judgment, and acted from a lack of judgment, and it is on that basis that he is judged. The court of law is important for her, although she wants it to be international rather than national. And in the end, she wants judges to act as Kantian subjects, so philosophy proves to be the true authority behind good legal judgment.

**Question:** In the last years, referring to authors like Levinas and Arendt, you are elaborating a conception of the ethical subject in which the constitution of subjectivity itself as well as the ethical possibility of the subject, but also its capacity to think and the very possibility of a critical gesture are possible only through a scene “populated” by the others and through the exposure of the subject to different forms of alterity. At the same time you stress also the capacity of agency of the subject in constituting itself as an ethical subject. Do you think that the reflection of the late Foucault concerning the work of transformation of the self could be useful to think the ethical subject that you address and to what extent do you make reference to it? In other words, if on the one hand you radically challenge the reference to a self-mastery that the last reflections of Foucault seem to in part to postulate and to indicate, are there any aspects of the Foucaultian ethics of the self that according to you are relevant in order to articulate the ethical practice and its critical function?

**Judith Butler:** I am sure that the late Foucault is quite important for thinking through this process, though I am wondering how, for instance, one would approach a Foucaultian theory of vulnerability? It is my sense that many of the most recent and effective public mobilizations involve enacting a certain body politic in concert. The bodies on the street are not only agentic and relational, but also precarious. They are precarious at the moment that they appear on the street, but they are also there to bring attention to a more systematically induced precarity – the loss of jobs, homes, health insurance, the accumulation of unpayable debt, leading either to a sense of no futurity or a one marked by what Hegel would call “a bad infinity”.

It seems clear that the late Foucault helps me to think about speech, of speaking back to power, and to ways of moving beyond the protocols of self-defense and self-justification. There is clearly a performative dimension to speaking in some of the late work, and a presumption that self-constitution happens in relation to others. So all this is most helpful,
but I wonder if the embodied dimension of speaking, including the pre-
dicament of speaking as or from the body in a condition of precarity, can
be thought well enough through that work. It is clear that Foucault was
himself speaking and writing as he was ill, and surely grasping the condi-
tions of his own precarity. Understanding in a non-reductive way how that
sense of an historically induced evanescence entered into his final reflec-
tions on law and *parrhesia* would be of great interest to me.

*Question:* We would like to refer to your text *What is Critique? An Essay
on Foucault’s Virtue*, since it seems to us that your way of articulating the
Foucaultian notion of “regime of truth” goes beyond the production of
a partition between true and false, by showing rather the production of
a *partage* between lives that matter and lives that do not matter. You have
developed this last point in many of your following works. But pointing
at the very partition between lives that matter and lives that do not matter,
are you also addressing a modality of recognition basically grounded
on a binary division? And, if so, do you think that there is a fundamental
partition at stake in our present that is also condition for the production
of all the others?

*Judith Butler:* I think that most recently I have started to talk about an
unequal distribution of grievability, which suggests that there are avari-
ety of gradations. Indeed, we would probably have to distinguish among
lives that are hyper-grievable, who come to stand symbolically for a na-
ton, those who are more or less grievable, those who are consistently
less grievable, and then those who are never grievable, foreclosed from
the possibility. I am not producing new categories as much as I am trying
to indicate that degrees of grievability shift depending on the historical
context, and that some populations are hyper-grievable in one context,
and quite ungrievable in another. Similarly, we might say that even within
a single, broadly delimited context, lives can be simultaneously grievable
and not, and public discourse can be confounded by the question of
whether and how to grieve certain losses. To say that grievability shifts
in this way is to say as well that modes of disavowing and discarding life
shift in this way as well.

*Question:* According to Foucault *parrhesia* is a way of truth-telling that
produce a scandal and that entails the exposure of the subject to a risk.
Defining *parrhesia* as an attitude, Foucault seems to recall his definition of critique that you have also largely analysed in your essay. However, the production of the scandal is internal to a “parrhesiastic game” – as Foucault underlines – that ultimately defines the space and the perimeter in which the parrhesiastic speech is uttered. Do you think that this space could be effectively disrupted through the parrhesiastic scandal? And do you envisage the practice of *parrhesia* as pertaining to the regime of the performative?

*Judith Butler*: I certainly understand *parrhesia* as part of the domain of performativity, but I am not sure I would call it “a regime”. Nor am I altogether clear whether the metaphor of the “game” (and “game theory”) is altogether helpful. Are we speaking about a game, a regime, or some more shifting and provisional speech situation? Is *parrhesia* presumed to be performed or exercised by an individual? What about groups that sing or chant or engage in silent actions? Do they count as part of parrhesiastic practice? If *parrhesia* defines the speech situation in which it occurs, then it is clearly performative, but in a way that moves beyond Bourdieu’s definition. My questions remain, though: does it matter that it is a speaking body that engages in *parrhesia*, and that it is located somewhere and has the shifting of the terms of location as part of its aim? Can there be concerted *parrhesia*, that is an alliance of speakers, and even if they do not act or speak in unison, can that convergence of voices, gestures, and actions be considered parrhesiastic?

*Question*: In your reading of Foucault, one of the sentences where you often linger on is the following: “How does it come to be that the human subject makes himself into an object of possible knowledge, through which forms of rationality, through which historical conditions, and, finally, at what price?”² In an interview with Vikki Bell (*New Scenes of Vulnerability, Agency and Plurality*) you come back to this sentence going beyond that, since you relate it with the criteria of exclusion that determine what can be called the “scales of productivity” of the subjects and their being recognisable as subjects and bringing the attention to the fact that the non recognizability of some is necessarily constitutive of the subjectivity of

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² Michel Foucault, *Structuralisme et poststructuralisme*, quoted in J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 120.
the others. Here you recall the sentence: “At what price do any of us get produced as subjects?”. Could you clarify this question? And the “price to be paid” is also in this case the price that the subject that is produced let to be paid by others in terms of exclusion or as not-being recognizable?

Judith Butler: I do think that every regime of rationality has its own constitutive outside, which means that it must produce and maintain the non-rational or irrational outside of its boundary. The subject who emerges through that regime of rationality establishes his or her intelligibility within that regime (we might think of the “his or her” as a key logical operator of one binary regime of gender). The formation of the subject is, however, not commensurate with the establishment of its intelligibility. After all, it is not just that the non-rational is posited outside the regime, but for every subject, the non-rational is produced as part of its less intelligible constitution. In this way it is important to see that subject formation within a matrix of intelligibility always partially fails, since it cannot happen without positing its “outside” as interior to the subject itself, the abiding specter of its undoing.

At the same time, we have to think about this risk and this loss in terms of the managing of populations, of biopolitics and governmentality both. Although I know Foucault’s work on neo-liberalism less well, it is clear that certain forms of ordering the subject clearly imply unequal and uneven forms of assimilation to that rationality. My sense is that precarity is induced by neo-liberal regimes of rationality as its necessary condition and outside. For the self-maximizing subject is a norm that implies a differential realization of its aims. Foucault is generally less concerned with recognition than I am. I bring that concern forward from my engagement with Hegel. But he is the one who often underscores that escaping from prevailing norms of recognition can be the condition of freedom itself. I am always working, it seems, with the need for new forms of recognition to condition livable life at the same time that I am wary of forms of recognition, sometimes the very same forms, that under certain circumstances can make life less than livable.

Question: In your last book, Parting Ways, you reflect on the possibility of an ethical life through the notion of unchosen cohabitation, mainly addressing Arendt’s work. In some passages of your essay you stress the element of non-freedom that is constitutive of that condition. Foucault
defines instead the ethics as “the reflected practice of freedom”. This last aspect seemed to be at stake in some of your reflections on the ethics which stressed rather the element of the claim. Could you dwell upon this aspect?

*Judith Butler:* I appreciated Foucault’s definition, but I am led to wonder about how the unchosen dimensions of life can themselves become the occasion for a reflected practice of freedom. After all, what is “reflected” is not simply this self that I am, and not simply the freedom that I exercise, but also the limits on that exercise, and the rather recalcitrant ways that history works on any of us. As Foucault would doubtless agree, freedom becomes possible only under certain conditions, and some of those conditions are not freely chosen. So it seems important to think, for instance, about unchosen dimensions of sociality and proximity, of embodiment and lineage. Reflecting on them does not transform them into expressions of freedom, but rather circumscribes the embodied and historical conditions under which a certain version of freedom becomes possible.

Arendt and Foucault both clearly have a way of understanding freedom as an exercise or a practice, thus moving us away from freedom as a natural endowment or a prori condition. But where it seems that Arendt specifies certain forms of political freedom, such as revolution, as concerted action, I have a more difficult time finding an equivalent to that notion in Foucault. Perhaps the category of the “subject” or even “the self” works across the individual/social distinction in Foucault, but it does not seem to do enough to establish the unchosen, historical, and embodied dimensions of sociality or the forms of freedom that we might understand as undertaken by alliances.

*Question:* Recently you have insisted a lot on the idea of vulnerability as the condition which constitutes ourselves as subjects and at once as the condition which allow us to rethink our ethical being and our ethical acting as well. However, according to many scholars, vulnerability works today as one of the main modalities through which subjects are produced within the government of the humanitarian. How do you situate yourself in comparison to this perspective? Don’t you think that insofar as a category becomes an object of the discourse of power, the risk of its effective weakening or subsumption arise?
Judith Butler: It is clear that the identification of “vulnerable populations” by NGOs and humanitarian agencies works to deny such groups their history and their agency, including their powers of resistance. But my aim is to think vulnerability and resistance together. In fact, that is the name of a group of feminists I am convening in Istanbul in September 2013. In the United States, national military policy is often governed by an ideal of radical invulnerability, and this means that vulnerability ought to be distributed among other nations and peoples. This way of exporting vulnerability is both justified and enacted in military policy, such that the US secures the impermeability of its own borders only by invading the borders of those whose land or infrastructure its seeks to secure for its own military and economic purposes. One might understand the humanitarian preoccupation with managing “vulnerable populations” as the necessary complement of that military policy that targets and produces disproportionately vulnerable populations. My own view is that vulnerability has to be rethought as interdependency, and that anti-militarist interventions at a global level have to affirm the necessary interconnection of populations. So I do think my view of vulnerability is part of a broader view of global mobilization, and seeks to criticize both militarism and forms of humanitarian power that serve as its complement.

Question: In your reflection on unchosen cohabitation it seems that the reference to the right to belong that you formulate in the sentence, by referring to Arendt, “everyone has a right to belong to a place, that right belongs to everyone regardless of the place to which they belong”, plays as an ethical possibility that despite it has to be rearticulated from time according to the circumstances, is in some sense trans-historical. It seems to us that on this point there is a difference in comparison to your works on recognition, where you stress the historicity of the normative frameworks of the scene of recognisability, relating in this way to the Foucaultian reflection addressed to underline the historical dimension of the constitution of the subject.

Judith Butler: Probably it is important to note first that I read Foucault and I read Arendt, but I am neither a Foucaultian nor an Arendtian. I think Arendt’s formulation is at once historical and generalizable, and that it can only be understood through a kind of double-lens. She is making a nor-
mative claim, namely, that everyone has a right to a place. But she understands that descriptively speaking not everyone has a place to which they belong. She is writing, let us remember, about refugees, those who have been expelled from the nation-state or who have never fully belonged (the Roma, for instance).

So to say that everyone has a right to a place (in the sense of “ought to have a right”) even when they do not have a place means that no particular jurisdiction or locale ultimately furnishes that right. When there is no local or national jurisdiction that gives that right, the right still exists. But it is neither founded in reason or nature or any particular regime of positive law. On the contrary, Arendt is at this moment declaring the right through speech, which means that her declaration, like the Declaration of the Rights of Man, is a performative exercise. In a world increasingly full of refugees and exiles, those without citizenship rights or dispossessed of prior rights to land, the declaration of the right to belong is a kind of partheresiastic speech. When Arendt makes the declaration, she is showing that the right is a function of its exercise.

**Question:** Finally, even though we do not want to make the mistake to ask you to give an account of yourself, establishing a narrative linearity, would you like to tell us what kind of connection do you see between your analysis situated within the feminist horizon and your more recent reflections?

**Judith Butler:** Well, I certainly still work within a feminist horizon, to be sure, and perhaps it is possible now to think about forms of feminist thinking that do not at every moment have to be centered on the question of women or on gender. The work on vulnerability clearly comes from a long line of feminist thought, but also the work on the public and private spheres. My early work on gender was focused on performativity, and that continues to be important to my understanding of political action in an embodied form. That early work was also focused on unmarked forms of loving and losing, especially under conditions of compulsory heterosexuality and pervasive homophobia.

Some of that same concern with marking losses, and establishing new terms that would make embodied life more livable continue in my recent reflections on war and conflict. So I am perhaps still militating against
imposed forms of melancholia and precarity, and this is as important to think about for non-gender conforming people, trans people, sex workers as it is for populations living under occupation and/or subject to bombing, dispossession, and destruction. I think perhaps that my bias in favor of non-violence recurs throughout my work, as does the search for modes of recognition that make life more livable rather than less.

*Interview conducted in March 2013*

**Vulnerability and Resistance. Interview with Judith Butler**

Starting from Foucault’s analyses on the dispositive of sexuality that since the 80s have inspired Judith Butler’s work in the field of feminist studies, the US philosopher interrogates on the theoretical patterns paved by the late Foucault on ethics and subjectivity. Despite Butler deals with categories that she considers very relevant for a diagnosis of the present and that instead are not at stake in Foucault’s work – first and foremost vulnerability and precariousness – they are placed nevertheless into a broader analysis and according to a Foucaultian matrix, especially in relation to the issue of practices of freedom, that in the two authors are differently articulated. In particular, the reflection on the price to pay to be a subject highlights an important juncture between Foucault and Butler: on the one hand, it consists in thinking together powers and resistances, on the other it refers to the substantial ambivalence of processes of subjectivation – recalling Foucault’s twofold meaning of “subject”.

*Keywords: Vulnerability, Critique, Resistance, Scene of address, Grievability, Subjectivation, Parrhesia.*