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Crisis, Critique, and the Possibilities of the Political

EIRINI AVRAMOPOULOU interviews Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou apropos the publication of their book

Dispossession: The Performative in the Political (Polity Press, 2013)

Introduction to the Interview

By intertwining significant philosophical questions on subjectivity, precarity, biopolitics and performativity with contemporary dilemmas on acts of dissidence, collective protests, activism and art, this book interrogates *dispossession* as a complex notion. Having already been attached to processes of systematic and severe economic deprivation, as in the case of forced migration, unemployment and homelessness, dispossession, also becomes here a significant key word in order to push ideas of relatedness and (co-)existence further into the domain of both critical thinking and political engagement.

What does it mean to have or own possessions (i.e. land, property, titles or entitlements, like a name or rights, obligations, responsibilities, as well as relations) if that would connote both a valorisation of individualism in the context of neoliberal governmentality and a legitimisation of forms of sociality reified in the context of capitalism, liberalism and humanism? On the other hand, what would it mean asking to be dispossessed if that would also signify a state of vulnerability tightly connected to precarity, deprivation and exploitation, especially when people and populations live under such conditions and struggle to make a living or have a liveable life? Overall, how can one claim differently forms of possessions and make a political claim over dispossession? Could dispossession resonate with a form of resistance against the conditions that reiterate (neo)liberal and normative claims over being in, or having, a life? Could it serve as a political promise? There are no simple answers to these questions, as both Athanasiou and Butler seem to agree on, in their obvious intention to offer us intriguing meditations on how to approach such dilemmas in this thought-provoking book.

By relating dispossession to performativity, this book compels us to understand dispossession against its possible translation as a speech act that celebrates agency, but as an act that also exposes the impossibilities attached to subversion. In other words, claiming to be in a state of dispossession does not necessarily let someone free of possessions, especially when possessions are forms of passionate attachments, which at times run the risk of reinscribing normative relations. At the same time, claiming to be dispossessed might connote letting go of passionate attachments, which have already been forced into the domain of disposability, displacement, and erasure. Put differently, being dispossessed might mean that one would need to let go of those attachments that constitute one's being in the world and one's relation to others – attachments that might be hard to let go especially when someone has been deprived of the possibility to lay claims over them.

To make this more concrete, in discussing the movie *Strella* (A Woman's Way) (directed by Panos H. Koutras, Greece, 2009), Athanasiou and Butler illustrate this paradox. *Strella*, a made-up and self-assigned name used by the protagonist of the movie who is a transsexual sex worker, means stardom ('stella' in Latin) and madness ('trella' in Greek). The choice of bearing this name reflects the comment made by Mina Organou, the transgender amateur actress who plays *Strella*, when asked by a journalist to answer what has been the most extreme thing she has ever done in her life. 'Myself!' she responded. Here, the claim to be one's self becomes even more vocal especially if this 'self' has repeatedly been done and undone as it has repeatedly been cast as an impossibility within everyday scenarios of cultural norms, kinship bonds, and social policing of normative lifestyles and desires. Holding on to an 'I', in this case, as in any other case when one's existence is constantly threatened, injured and sanctioned, troubles and repoliticises the liberal acclamation of an 'I', according to Athanasiou, especially when this 'I' is so often under scrutiny and interpellation (p. 65). At the same time, this name also signifies a moment of *self-poiesis* that differs from its possible translation as a neoliberal self-stylisation or an untroubled self-making. *Strella* performatively signs her own name in this moment of poiesis – a moment that cannot be translated to the celebration of emancipatory politics, but rather is the outcome of a need to understand 'how the problem of desire suffuses the issue of the name', as Butler poignantly analyses (p. 137). Butler's argument once again reminds us that a performative act is not a 'free' game in which one can choose a self and enact it. A non-normative act is performative because if in every act, or in the repetition of an act there is a possibility of identification, then the act of repetition carries the potential to de-institute the classifications through which identities are institutionalised and naturalised. However, at the heart of the potential undoing of norms there is no celebration of agency, but rather this process reveals that an act of non-complicity with the norms comes at times at the price of discipline, punishment and violence.

In this sense, attempting to understand dispossession as formative and transformative of human relations renders powerful the question of how language is implicated in what one tries to transgress. This process, unavoidably, has to pass through an engagement with the labour of the negative, which is a constitutive aspect of performativity and performative politics. For example, being dispossessed cannot be turned into an affirmative action as it also cannot be conceived as an unambivalent political ideal especially when one has to take into account the suffering of those excluded, deprived, displaced, those leading precarious lives or those turned into colonised, racialised and sexualised subjects. Hence, this book interrogates the possibilities and impossibilities of imagining and enacting alternative ways of being in relation to others and to oneself beyond the limits set by an intelligibility that forecloses the realms of human life and without resting on simple assumption of resistance and subversion.

Athanasiou's question 'What happens then to the language of representation when it encounters the challenge of conveying broken human corporeality into the body of the text?' (p. 132) reverberates as an aporia of how to fight for a space where the unintelligible or the ineffable will

keep on troubling what is already 'there' or what has already been rendered known, tangible, and conceived. Or else, how to render the unintelligible and the ineffable as constitutive parts of an agonistic vision shaped by those bodies who protest against their confinement as they lay claims to different ways of existence, or as they assemble in the streets and are let to be defined by the conviviality of collective actions. Such questions lead us to think anew the act of speech as an act that pertains to bodily actions and redefines the 'shadowy realms' of body politics. Regina Jose Galindo's performance, for instance, reminds us that dispossession is a performative process involving acts of dissidence as aspects of corporeality. As Butler describes in Galindo's 2003 performance, entitled 'Who Can Erase the Traces', the artist, dressed in black, walks through the streets of Guatemala carrying a white basin with blood. Her feet dipped in blood leave footprints all the way until she reaches the National Palace where she protests the decision of the Guatemalan Supreme Court to permit a former member of the military junta to run as president. The footprints of blood become signatures of an art-work, a political protest and a memorial of the dead, Butler attests (p. 169). When the question 'who can erase the traces' is signed by the movement and the fluids of the body (p. 170), 'the body is a memory come alive', according to Butler because it 'persists, survives, showing and enacting a social history, memorialising those forms of suffering and loss against the lure of forgetfulness' (p. 172).

Indeed, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* offers a continuous exercise in what it means to insist on deconstructive thinking and on how to be attentive to the affective economies of negative passions without being rendered numbed or disarmed by them, especially when the pervasive forces of neoliberal economies and liberal politics repeatedly produce socially assigned disposability of peoples and populations. From Mina Orfanou's proclamation to be let be 'her-self,' to Galindo's bodily enactment of memories that bleed, to the echoes of the slogan 'we are here' as it resounds in different protests from Tahrir Square and the uprisings in the Middle East and Northern Africa to Puerta del Sol, Syntagma Square, and Zuccotti Park, the aporia remains of how to communicate the 'broken human corporeality' into the body of a text, which bears the signature of a 'we'.

It is not a coincidence, then, that this book ends with an analysis of the message given by those who insist to state in public that 'we are here' while reclaiming some forms of collective precarity and while refusing to let their bodies and voices become disposable. As Butler argues, 'the "We are here" that translates that collective bodily presence might be re-read as "We are *still* here", meaning: "We have not yet been disposed of. We have not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life: we have not become the glaring absence that structures your public life"' (p. 196). This claim reverberates the necessity to understand solidarity, in Athanasiou's words 'as an injurious yet enabling mode of "concerted action" in conditions of dispossession' (p. 184). Ultimately, by challenging the otherwise thinkable and by moving in and out of the ineffable and unintelligible so as to claim it as a critical moment for political mobilisation and for giving shape to an agonistic vision of (co-)existence, the 'we' uttered in the streets, as well as the 'we' conveyed in the corpus of

this book, offers a continuous exercise in how to insist on a solidarity created between critical thinking and political engagement. Dispossession, after all, echoes a desire for creating political avenues towards be-longing, and as Athanasiou writes 'belonging is not just about being and having but also about longing: perhaps longing for a different way to cohabit the political' (p. 159). Similar are the echoes of the questions posed to the authors in the interview that follows.

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CRISIS AND DISPOSSESSION

Eirini Avramopoulou:

As you unravel in your book, dispossession carries a 'double valence'. It is a term used to emphasise a neoliberal practice of violent material or legal deprivation and enforced loss. At the same time, though, dispossession appears to be analysed as a performative practice that resonates with the need for a critical reconstitution of the politics of living (and living-with). As a performative practice, then, dispossession seems to insert a certain 'crisis' in the realm of politics and in the political constitution of the subject. Today, when 'crisis' features as a technology of producing and regulating economy, society, emotions, liveable conditions of life and accountable features of living-with, why is it important to rethink the terms of a different crisis? Or else, what does it mean for those already dispossessed to claim a different form of dispossession?

Judith Butler:

In the first instance, we probably have to be careful about talking about an economic crisis. It sounds naive to say there is no economic crisis, since there are massive consequences throughout society as a result of neoliberal forms of financialisation and the destruction of basic infrastructures, durable work, and even the sense of future itself. But if we call it a crisis, we expect a resolution that will restore a former order. Crisis discourse suggests that we have a problem to be managed and resolved. But the issue is more fundamental since it now pertains to new modalities of capitalism and its effects on populations throughout the globe. As much as we must focus on workers and their exploitation, we also have to see that the very nature of work and worklessness has changed. For work to become flexible or dispensable or transient means precisely that there is no duration to a given job, no way of organising at a workplace that is constantly shifting, and the very work conditions that enable unionisation are in peril. The precariat is, in this sense, analytically distinct from the proletariat, but the two categories perpetually collapse into each other. The worker is always about to lose work, and the unemployed is now hoping only for transient work. As a result, dispossession has become something that characterises both the employed and the unemployed, as it does those who have become forced migrants and take great risks to secure even transient work.

Work takes place or does not take place according to a contemporary logic that constantly undermines spatial locatedness and temporal duration. What persists is the ever expanding horizon of precarity and a new configuration of space and time in which dispossession is the norm.

I do not think that now we should all organise under the banner of precarity or dispossession. We have to organise in ways that acknowledge and oppose the systematic character of neoliberalism and its modes of financial inaction and dispossession. But to do this, we have to understand how it works.

Athena Athanasiou:

We tried to reflect together on how the ‘crisis’, as a power configuration of neoliberal capitalism, calls for a critical re-engagement with, and re-imagining of, the political; how dispossession becomes an occasion for dealing with the question of thinking critically in times of crisis. So, we ask: how is the political performed, where and how does it ‘take place’? How does the crisis work to reproduce, complicate, alter and/or intensify what qualifies as political subjectivity and how this is gendered, racialised, and classed? Furthermore, how might such questions be asked from the perspective of a resistant performative politics of reclaiming public spaces and liveable lives?

Dispossession implies the neoliberal violence of disposability, but is also integral to processes by which subjects are formed in loss and in relation to one another. As it marks the limits of one’s own self-sufficiency, it becomes an occasion for the collective political work of trans-formation.

In these times of crisis, when certain groups are rendered disposable and exposed to death, of poverty, racism, state abandonment and violence, we ask: how can ‘we’, as subjects of the crisis (with all the trepidations, uncertainties, and impossibilities that mark this ‘we’), engage with, and prompt, an *agonistic*, instead of antagonistic (according to the neoliberal market logic), way of attending to dispossession. Such reimagining of the social prompts the political imaginaries of radical democracy today.

(NEO)LIBERALISM AND RECOGNITION

Eirini Avramopoulou:

Fighting for recognition often appears to take shape as if it is a struggle for identity politics, one which risks reiterating a normative logic of ascribing a single truth over the constitution of the subject while disregarding the complexity through which power relations and subjectivation work. You discuss the idea that the neoliberal demand for recognition might be exactly what one ‘cannot not want’. Here, one might need to think of the fight for rights recognition in the LGBT movement, migration, disability etc., where recognition is a matter of survival, even if there is always the risk of making this demand for recognition appear as the only true claim for the reality of the subject, as well as for claiming freedom. How does recognition relate to the question of survival and how can it be separated from an individualistic and narcissistic claim of self-definition?

Athena Athanasiou:

We take up recognition as an occasion to explore what it means to think about the subject (which is not the same as 'individual') as the subject of dispossession and induced precarity, but also as a subject of 'being-with'.

Recognition is an arena where the terms of recognisability ('who' can qualify as a recognisable subject) are (re-)produced, negotiated, and unsettled. The politics of recognition is contingent upon such questions of power relations, subjectivation, and difference: who asserts difference and who demands recognition, who has the power to grant recognition, on what conditions it is conferred, what possibilities it enables, and what other possibilities it might render unintelligible. As recognition embodies histories of trauma and exclusion, it can be also reactivated to expose, unsettle, and transform such normative terms and limits of recognisability.

The trouble with recognition has to do with the fact that demanding recognition is necessarily implicated with the power of the state or the law to establish the terms of recognisable subjectivity. Asking the state to recognise certain modes of life, intimacy or belonging risks conferring consent to the established norms of subjectivity; at the same time, it provokes creative crisis to these norms and demarcations.

In the context of left politics, recognition critically engages with the conditions of those made precarious by racism, state violence, class exploitation, hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. It opens the way for a transformation of the conditions that have enabled such injuries and injustices.

Judith Butler:

This is a very good question and it deserves serious attention. Let us start by considering what is implied by the scene of recognition. There is first the question of who recognises whom, that is, who has the power to confer recognition. There is no recognition without someone or some institution with the power to confer recognition. And then there is the question of who is demanding recognition. If someone or some group is demanding it, they do so from someone or some institution with the power to confer it. So we can see that the scene of recognition understood in this way presupposes and reproduces a hierarchical modality of power. Recognition is not an act, but the mobilisation of a complex set of power relations. Then there is a third problem, namely, through what terms is recognition conferred, and how are they established. This brings us into that discursive field of power in which intelligibility and recognisability are established and delimited, which means that a domain of the unrecognisable is also constituted at the same time. What follows is that one might wish for recognition, but oppose the terms by which recognition can be conferred. At that point, a struggle at the level of political discourse is underway. One may also want recognition but not within a field of the recognisable that establishes only certain populations from its own norms, producing the unrecognisable. To win recognition on such a condition is to embrace both inequality and the social effacement of others. If an identitarian

position insists on rights of recognition only for one group without recognising that another group is effaced in the process of gaining recognition for one's own, then the politics or recognition becomes an instrument for the politics of both inequality and effacement. This is why the recognition can only work for a democratic left alliance and struggles against precarity and effacement on the basis of equality and justice. It is not a final or isolated goal.

POLITICS OF PLURAL PERFORMATIVITY

Eirini Avramopoulou:

As opposed to the classical monograph-monologism, the crucial dialogue as well as the critical self-meditations offered in this book provides a new strategy of writing that foregrounds the significance of speaking-with, co-thinking and creating alliances. This is also what defines 'plural performativity' as detailed in the book. Specifically, you refer to the book bloc, taking place in the streets of different European cities where the protesters literally 'wore' their books in order to defend ideas and ideals such as public education, universities and libraries. What should be one's expectation the moment when the books appear in the streets as a form of demonstration and revolt? What is the specific importance of contemporary attempts to create and sustain an alliance between critical thinking and radical action?

Athena Athanasiou:

Plural performativity (which is not the same as the 'pluralism' of liberalism) implies collective projects of critical thinking and action. It refers to becoming plural and relational as a way to question the self-centred and self-managed ego of liberal atomism and possessive individualism. It also works to call into question the authoritarian essentialisms that occasionally mark the notion of community. This politics of performativity does not efface the singular and the in-common but offers space for interconnectedness. It seeks to make difference without discounting differences.

The 'humanities' (in plural), as they refer to multiple notions of humanity and being-human, play a crucial role in emerging epistemologies of crisis as critical epistemologies. The double meaning of 'humanities' is suggestive here. Alternative 'humanities' (such as 'women', 'natives', the poor, the homeless, queers, strangers, the stateless, the undocumented, and all those who have been historically rendered not properly human) have always challenged the terms of differential allocation of humanness, and offered alternative notions of what figures as human.

In the context of the dominant economic doctrine of our time, the humanities are devalued and called upon to conform to the managerial logic of entrepreneurial knowledge. Thus, the historical responsibility of critical theory today is precisely to re-imagine and re-activate the critique of the present, to open up new possibilities for equality and freedom.

Judith Butler:

Perhaps that question is best answered by considering how many of the recent demonstrations in Chile, in Greece, in Canada, in Bulgaria have been motivated by students who are demanding a right to an affordable education. Their protests are not just to have tuitions decreased or abolished, but to establish public education as a public good, a social value, one whose value cannot be measured by neoliberal metrics. The widespread opposition to the Bologna accords and their metrics for valuing knowledge production clearly includes the demand to an affordable education in which forms of inquiry can be taught that broaden the very idea of what is valuable, of social and political values, including notions of freedom, justice, and equality, of aesthetic values, that exceed the neoliberal imaginary. So, one needs a critical perspective to argue that neoliberal metrics, including quantitative assessment, profit, utility, and impact, perform a violent reduction of the realm of values. Even the capacity to see the chasm that opens up between these orders of value is an operation of critical thought. If we think there is a value to that form of thinking, then we affirm the value, and the urgency, of critical theory.

The students on the street establish themselves as public actors, establishing education as a public good. And by showing those books, they show what is at risk of being lost. The message is in the action. Sometimes we must show and assert the value of what we read in order to fight for the very public and infrastructural conditions that let us read. The materiality of the book, even the author's name or the title can show the valued objects now at risk of being lost. To demonstrate with such books is to demonstrate their value, (and to demonstrate the value of demonstration), making the public case for reading and for preserving institutions where such books can be read. The book bloc proclaims: This is precisely what is lost when universities destroy the humanities, the interpretative social sciences, the arts, critical science studies. Those demonstrations know the loss that is happening, and they bring the book out of the library and onto the street to stop that destruction.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE LEFT

Eirini Avramopoulou:

In the context of today's thick political reality of resistance and revolt (from the Arab spring to Brazil, from Syntagma Square to Gezi Park) what are the current challenges posed when trying to think through the prism of radical left discourse and feminist theory?

Judith Butler:

I am not sure I am the person to answer this question. This is a question that does not need a single intellectual, but a broader dialogue among many participants. What Athena Athanasiou and I tried to do is to juxtapose forms of plural performative action in different regions in an effort to see what commonalities and differences could be found. But ours is an anecdotal operation, not a systematic inquiry. I do think that as governments contract with private industry to take over or

destroy public space, public services and basic infrastructural components of public life, from roads to schools, there is a popular understanding of how capitalism is working now. In Brazil, the destitution of whole parts of the city takes place simultaneously with a massive influx and investment of capital into building the Olympics apparatus. This is plain to see, and the relationship of increased wealth for some and the drastic destitution of the many has brought people out into the streets to oppose this radical economic injustice and this destruction of public space (like Gezi). But also what is being devastated is the idea that the government might still have as one of its defining obligations the representation of the people, their interests and demands, and their well-being. Indeed, the state becomes increasingly delinked from the task of representing the popular will as it becomes a more efficient vehicle for expanding markets. The mass movements on the street are precisely the upsurge of popular sovereignty at the very moment when the state abandons its obligations to represent the people and safeguard public space and goods. As a result, the state is exposed as having lost its popular legitimacy as its primary function now becomes facilitating the expansion of financial markets. The upsurge of people on the street is thus a challenge to that shift whereby the state is now tied to financial markets, and finds it legitimating reasons for what it does, and that is through the expansion of those markets and their metrics of value.

A basic political requirement is now to interrupt and expose the naturalisation and acceleration of that process, and to reassert the notion of 'the people' so that democracy is a matter for public articulation and debate.

Athena Athanasiou:

The current regimes of crisis management involve the decimation of public spaces and services, deepened disparities, disposable labour, the biopolitical economisation of life, state authoritarianism and autarchic measures of social normalisation. Neoliberalism is not just about restructuring capitalist market economy, but also a neoconservative governmentality, which involves, along with a redistribution of capital, a redistribution of the social and the political, and, most notably, a redistribution of the normative preconditions of political subjectivity.

In a Europe which witnesses a neo-Nazi upsurge, the politics which produces superfluous and desperate people is intricately related to fascism, racism, and the extreme nationalist definition of homogeneous and exclusive community, with all their fundamental implications of masculinism and heteronormativity.

The neoliberal governmentality that we call 'crisis' becomes a modality of power which relies on the production of precarious and disposable populations according to established norms of capital, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. I think the question of allied anti-fascist, anti-neoliberal, and feminist politics has to be kept active as an ongoing challenge for our political action to produce, performatively, other ways of collective reflection and action, alternative to the existing schemes of community and normativity – be it economic, national, gender or sexual normativity. It is in this sense that in this book we take up the political as performative.

