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**Judith Butler. 2012. *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. New York: Columbia University Press. 288 pp.
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In Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012), the historical call of the Shoah is present. Examining ways in which the Holocaust continues to constitute a stumbling block on which Western civilization trips over its morals, history and violence in the present, Butler describes this as an operation of trauma, where time is held hostage by a past whose violence overwhelms reason, and thus obscures possibility. A confusion of times results, relevant not only for understanding how the traumatized are forced to repeatedly confront suffering, which takes hold of the future, but also for the notion of competing temporalities that Butler has often turned to in the past decade. What would it mean to break the spell of this traumatic hold on historical scale?

This question guides a careful untangling of the knots of effacement and obscurity that enable the misuse of our trauma and history. I

use the pronoun 'we' in the hope of speaking to a tentative and hopeful universal that emerges in Butler's work and can be understood to be consistently elaborated in this book. This is not an attempt to impose a universal by erasing distinction and particularity but, instead, one that aims to honor the basic needs we increasingly share. In these pages, the possibility and necessity of such a vulnerable yet global universality has to do with learning a lesson from the ungraspable historical catastrophe called Shoah, Holocaust or Auschwitz.

Parting Ways is comprised of eight chapters, many of which have been published in previous versions or given as lectures. Together they present the direction of thought of one of the most widely-cited contemporary Western thinkers. From critiquing conditions that enable war today in *Frames of War* (2009), Butler turns in *Parting Ways* to the controversial questions of the poli-

tics of memory. Adhering to no identitarian tradition, the work evokes the cohabitation of Jewish and non-Jewish thinking on Israel/Palestine. Butler's conception of cohabitation as the basic right that might ground other rights is developed in Chapter 6, 'Quandaries of the Plural.' This increasingly significant notion emerges from a sustained engagement with Hannah Arendt's work, especially *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where Arendt understands genocide in terms of a refusal to share the world with others.

Butler argues that taking into account voices of varying traditions in a critique of unjust policies is politically and theoretically necessary to combat the hegemonic effect that aims to silence criticism. With characteristic poignancy and even momentary lightness in the face of excruciatingly heavy questions, the book assembles a motley crew including Emmanuel Levinas, Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said, who accompany us on the way to making a claim for binationalism in Israel/Palestine. While in the corporate media echoes of impossibility form the background of this complex issue, careful historical considerations belie the excuses which would perpetuate the conflict for the sake of domination and exploitation in the region. The theme of binationalism does not falter throughout the following pages, but acquires a philosophical depth, the inspiration for which Butler attributes to Said and Arendt.

In light of the recent UN decision to recognize Palestine's independent observer status, a movement is legible toward alleviating the unsustainability propped up by the Israeli wall, in the context of which the question of binationalism gains urgency.

Chapter 2, 'Unable to Kill: Levinas contra Levinas,' exhibits the practice of reading that neither rejects a work outright for its mistakes, nor ignores problems to accept it wholesale. This nuanced practice enables Butler to extend Levinas' ethics to those whom he was unable to face on his own terms. Thus this chapter returns to the struggle with the commandment not to kill and its contemporary reverberations. This concern forms a central thread in Butler's work on ethics and politics, via Levinas and Walter Benjamin. Throughout the discussion of the prohibition of killing, nonviolence emerges as the call of ethics in Butler's work, irreducible (and perhaps in counter-distinction) to pacifism. Chapter 3, 'Walter Benjamin and the Critique of Violence,' is a slightly expanded version of Butler's 2006 discussion, which reads Benjamin's seminal essay in terms of nonviolence, and thus in counter-distinction to Derrida's criticism in 'Force of Law' (1990). The small additions to the introduction and the last section (re)turn to Benjamin's notoriously difficult and controversial thinking on messianic materialism, also addressed in the following Chapter 4, 'Flashing Up.'

Skipping ahead, the final chapter, 'What shall we do without exile?' borrows its title from a poem by Mahmood Darwish. Here we witness a profound relation to literature and poetry, while elaborating the significance of exile. This relation is also important in *Frames of War*, and could be said to lend Butler's writing its at times ethereal quality. From *Gender Trouble* (1990) onward, we might surmise an engagement with literature as 'necessary fiction.' In earlier work, Butler described sex and gender as 'necessary fictions.' In similar terms, literature is neither circumscribed to a fictional realm nor reducible to a reflection of reality. There is a serious yet hopeful speaking and listening on both sides, as there is among theory and practice, which are neither separate nor homogenous for Butler. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the great appeal of such praxis today.

The penultimate Chapter 7, 'Primo Levi for the Present,' discusses another major theme in Butler's work: the appropriation of discourse, particularly that of the Shoah, as an inevitable yet indeterminable consequence of time. Exploring Primo Levi's struggle with the political heritage of being a witness in Auschwitz, Butler returns to the need to reappropriate this history against misuse and injustice rather than remaining silent. Levi had repeatedly and often provocatively criticized the belligerent policies

of the Israeli state. Butler wonders about Levi's suicide, after so many years of vocal testimony. Were the attempts to silence criticism of Israel's actions and policies, alongside the weight of living and dying that haunted survivors, related to Levi's inability to continue? Chapter 5, 'Is Judaism Zionism,' defends the position of Jews and others opposed to political Zionism in present form against defacing, hurtful and unfair accusations of self-hate, or Anti-Semitism, that are indiscriminately leveled against all critics of Israeli policies in certain places in Israel, Germany and United States, among others. In 2012 such accusations were directed against Butler, on the occasion of being awarded the Adorno Prize in Frankfurt, Germany. All the major German newspapers seemed to open their pages to Butler's defense of critique – also in relation to Israeli policies. *Parting Ways* reiterates how these charges not only water-down real issues of Anti-Semitism, but also attempt to silence critique through misappropriating the Shoah, which constitutes an instrumentalization of the politics of memory.

This book can be read as posing the necessity to learn from an event that overwhelms understanding in order to make that event what it should be – history – and thus open the possibility of breaking the traumatic hold that it exercises on the present. This lesson urges us to draw connections between the

wrongs that underlie fascism and racism; injustice must be opposed regardless of the identity of victims and perpetrators. This position does not contest the singularity of the Shoah, which is at once remembered as an existing historical event that exceeds full comprehension in its scale and its horror, and at the same time, approached as a catastrophe that cannot be used to justify any further suffering. The remembrance of the tragedy, the preservation of the memory of its victims, and safeguarding this memory against not only those who would deny it but also those who would deploy it to justify other kinds of oppression enable it to become what it is, and must be, and yet, what, following the nature of trauma, it has not been: history.

These are not humble aims, yet their necessity becomes more and more evident every day, as the reach of global politics becomes stronger and stronger in a world so prone to corruption that it characterizes its *modus operandi*. Violent conflicts break out repeatedly between Israeli forces and the civilian population, and not only Palestinian resisters. The Israeli army continues killing civilians, without even leaving safe places to evacuate the injured in the recent conflict.¹ Irrevocably situated in this current urgency, the critique at issue embodies the necessity of all modes of engagement, not least academic.

Endnotes

¹ *Democracynow* news report, 15 November 2012.

References

- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Brooklyn/London: Verso.
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