

JUDITH BUTLER AND THE VIRTUE OF TROUBLEMAKING

Today I want to talk about the importance of troublemaking for feminism and feminist ethics. The predominate understanding of troublemaking is that it is bad, improper, and/or counterproductive, performed by those individuals or groups who are “up to no good.” But, what if we twisted our understanding of troublemaking and thought about it as useful and productive? Instead of dismissing it as that which hinders or disrupts our actions, what would happen if we embraced troublemaking as that which is essential for mobilizing us to action, enabling us to shake our cynicism and ever-increasing hopelessness? Going even further, what if we thought about troublemaking as an important ethico-political virtue for feminism and its role as a democratic movement?

Now, thinking about troublemaking as important for feminism is nothing new; indeed, feminism as a radical social movement has been based on the practice of making trouble for the status quo and those oppressive institutions that deny or strip individuals/groups of their humanity. Feminists have embraced their role as “unruly” subjects and rebellious outlaws.

So, while there is clearly a precedent for emphasizing troublemaking within feminism, not enough critical and systematic attention has been given to troublemaking—how it should be performed and what ethico-political value it has for feminist individuals. Moreover, troublemaking is still seen as improper; when feminists make trouble, they dare to be bad (borrowing from Alice Echols). They are being rebellious, rejecting traditional norms and ethics. But, what if we rethink troublemaking? What if, when feminists make trouble, they dare to be good (borrowing from Ann Ferguson and Bar

Ami)? What if troublemaking allows them to create new ethical norms or at least expand upon the old ones?

My presentation will briefly introduce this idea of troublemaking as an important virtue for ethico-political selfhood in feminism and beyond. As my title suggests, I will do this by looking to the work of a notorious feminist troublemaker, Judith Butler. Butler is a fitting place to begin our exploration of the ethical and political significance of trouble. Not only has she successfully made trouble for feminist understandings of “identity,” “gender” and “woman,” but she has devoted much of her work in the past two decades to reflecting on troublemaking and its role in feminism and gender politics.

Before I begin, I want to confess that writing this presentation has given me quite a bit of trouble—I suppose it is fitting considering the topic. Maybe it is the fact that it is summer, maybe it is because I am trying to think about Butler in terms of ethics (not an easy fit), or maybe it is because trouble is a troubling category. While the term gets used a lot, and it gets thrown at feminists a lot—just a bunch of troublemakers—we don't think that much about what it means and what its potential is. Perhaps trouble is one of those taken-for-granted terms that Butler wishes to trouble? I think that trying to develop this presentation has also been difficult for me because it is so personal—I am a troublemaker or at least I have always been called a troublemaker.

Judith Butler and Troublemaking

Throughout her work, from *Gender Trouble* in 1989 to *Undoing Gender* and *Precarious Life* in 2004, Butler has explored and promoted the importance of trouble.

While she is most well known for her troubling of gender, she has, since *Gender Trouble*, given much attention to the larger theoretical/political significance of troublemaking for radically democratic movements like feminism.

In the 1989 preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler reflects on trouble and its value, concluding “that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it” (vii). For Butler, the best way to **make trouble** is to refuse to accept that how the fundamental categories of our existence, categories like “human” or “woman,” are understood is how they have been, how they should be and how they will always be understood. And it is to subject those categories to critical scrutiny in order to determine (1) the limits of their ability to be inclusive and to be translated into a wide range of contexts globally and (2) how they must be “expanded, destroyed or reworked in order to encompass and open up what it is to be human and gendered” (UG, 38). For Butler, this second aspect—the focus on expanding, destroying or reworking categories—frequently involves opening up and inhabiting the category in unexpected and unauthorized ways. (an example = women claiming that women’s human rights and using human rights discourse to push for more laws of protection against sexual violence and domestic abuse against women—claiming that women’s issues are human issues.

If the best way to make trouble is to critically question categories like “human” and to open them up to potentially new understandings, the best way to **be in trouble** is through a persistent examination of the difficult and frequently contradictory moments (those limits of our knowing) when we cannot easily read what is going on and when common sense and language seem to fail us. For Butler, those moments that “make us

wonder” and that “remain not fully explained and not fully explicable” (Butler 2001, 417) can generate some valuable and productive questions and debates about the limits and possibilities of fundamental categories like “human.”

Butler’s emphasis on the “limits of our most sure ways of knowing” is evident in her work. As she demonstrates in her analysis of drag in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, of Antigone and her in *Antigone’s Claim*, of the intersexed child, Joan/John in “Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality” and of gender and its relation to sex and sexual difference in “The End of Sexual Difference?,” she is drawn to those moments of degrounding and the ways in which they disrupt us, forcing us to stop uncritically consuming our basic categories of understanding and to start thinking about what it is we are consuming and why.

Because she gives so much attention to these moments of disruption, she is frequently in trouble with other feminist theorists who are frustrated with her inability to provide an agenda of “what is to be done” or a clear and universal definition of the category “human.” While some, like Martha Nussbaum, dismiss her troublemaking as hip-defeatism, Butler defends the making of and being in trouble as motivated by more than a desire to provoke for the sake of provoking or because our limits of knowing and the trouble that they create are “sexy” and “thrilling.”

According to Butler, individuals and collectives make trouble because they are already in trouble. For them, trouble is inevitable because the categories like “human” that are supposed to describe them do not or will not. They make trouble because they want to claim their own humanity in a system of norms that does not authorize those

claims, that does not consider their life worthy and that banishes them to the realm of unspeakability or to social death. And, they are in trouble because when they assert those unauthorized claims, they demonstrate the fragility and fallibility of our taken-for-granted norms.

Butler further defends troublemaking by demonstrating its political and ethical value for democratic movements like feminism. She argues that to make trouble by challenging categories and opening them up to thinking about them differently is not only to disrupt or to rebel or to challenge (although these are all important aspects of troublemaking). Making trouble has, in fact, ethical value for Butler. She claims that it is aimed at the ethical aspiration of “extending the norms that sustain viable life to previously disenfranchised communities” (*UG*, 225). Making trouble is about survival and extending the possibility of life (physical and social life) to those who have been denied it. It is also democratic in nature; it is about working to open up the category of human to be more inclusive and about working to guarantee freedom--the freedom “to live and breathe and move” (219)—to individuals who have previously been denied that freedom.

So, to recap: According to Butler, trouble is inevitable. The categories that shape/define/bring us into social existence, categories like “human” or “woman,” will always be troubled by those who don't fit them or are not allowed to claim them (this includes a wide range of individuals, Butler focuses on gays, lesbians, transsexuals, intersexed individuals, but we can also think about women and/or feminists here). The best way to **make trouble** is to critically think about those categories and open them up to new

meanings. The best way to **be in trouble** is to focus on the limits of our knowing, when we can't quite understand what is going on, when our categories cease to fully make sense (a trite but fitting example: when we can't fully make sense of what gender someone is or we misidentify them—this instance can raise some productive questions about how we “properly” inhabit the category, what kinds of visual/behavioral cues we use to demonstrate our gender, etc). **Trouble is valuable** because it allows us to rethink and rework our categories, enabling individuals who weren't previously able to claim them.

While Butler focuses on the ethical significance of trouble in terms of how it opens up categories to include more individuals, I want to think about the ethico-political value of troublemaking in a different way. Implicit in Butler's emphasis on trouble (throughout her writings) is the idea that not only do we need to make trouble or develop the best ways to be in trouble, we need to learn how to **stay in trouble**. Trouble is not something that we do for a short period of time in order to clear room for the *real* political and ethical work of movements for social transformation like feminism; the idea that, first we disrupt and unsettle and then we create and put into practice our specific agendas. No, making trouble and being in trouble are things that we must always do and they *are* ethical and political practices. (give quote about Butler and the ethical project) Now, that is a radical claim, one that has gotten Butler into quite a bit of trouble over the years and one that I think she has not developed fully enough in order to defend herself against her critics—critics like Martha Nussbaum who dismisses her troublemaking as “hip defeatism.”

So, what can we do with Butler's implicit claim, that troublemaking is an ethical and political (or, in the words of Ferguson and Bar-Ami, an ethico-political) practice? I think that a potentially fruitful way to think about troublemaking is as an ethical way of being, a mode of relating to the world, a quality of character, a disposition, an attitude that influences our ethical/political understandings and shapes our ethico-political development; I want to think of troublemaking as a feminist virtue. Now, let me be clear about this: suggesting that troublemaking is a virtue is not Butler's claim, it is mine. Would Butler endorse such a claim? I don't know, but I think that her notion of troublemaking—making trouble for categories/ideas by refusing to uncritically accept them, being in trouble by focusing on the limits of our knowing and staying in trouble in order to continue to question and refuse to easily accept—I think that there are many advantages to thinking about it as a virtue. Before I get to those advantages (and potential disadvantages), let me offer a brief outline of what troublemaking as a virtue might look like.

As I indicated above, a virtue is a quality of character, a disposition, a mode of seeing and relating to the world. Ethically speaking, to focus on virtue is to focus on what kind of person one should be (instead of exclusively on how one should act or what rules one should follow), and what kinds of qualities one should possess in order to live a good life, to live a life in which one is able to flourish (In the interest of time, I am using these important terms, "good life" and "flourish" loosely. What exactly we mean by them and how they work in the feminist context are important topics that I don't have time to address right now). To focus on virtue is to focus on *how* one should live and the attitude

we should have in all of our daily activities. For, virtue is not about a specific activity but about a way of approaching all activities.

So, what kind of attitude/mode of being is troublemaking and why is this important for feminists and feminist ethics? Simply put, troublemaking, as a virtue, is about being a critical thinker, about not easily or uncritically accepting the status quo, about being willing to question and challenge one's beliefs/understandings and asking after at how those beliefs were shaped and at what and whose expense. Troublemaking is about not being complacent, not merely accepting that how things are is how they should be, not passively consuming the ideas/ideology that one is presented with on a daily basis. Troublemaking is about having a passionate desire to do something, to critically engage with the world. Finally, troublemaking as a virtue is about using one's questioning and critical exploration to hold oneself and others accountable for their claims/theories/practices; to not only disrupt our ability to act, but to incite (and sometimes inspire) us to think about the consequences of our actions and how we might transform those actions to be more inclusive and democratic.

In its best moments, feminism does this troublemaking. **Say more here.**

Following Aristotle and his description of the virtues, I believe that troublemaking is best understood in the context of its deficiency and excess. To be deficient in troublemaking is to be too complacent; to refuse to question or challenge for fear of "rocking the boat"; to passively consume and perpetuate the ideas/ideology of others; to be disengaged and inactive; to blindly act or willingly accept and, above all else, to not think critically about one's own claims or the claims of others. **Fear of thinking**

To be excessive in one's troublemaking is to be too disruptive; to provoke only for the sake of provoking; to make trouble only to stop action and to anger and frustrate others; to be malicious and malevolent in one's questioning/challenging with the aim of belittling or devaluing others; to use troublemaking as an excuse for not taking a stand and not making a commitment to one's politics; and finally, to be excessive in troublemaking is lose site of the larger aim of troublemaking and lose site of the political agenda and democratic vision that motivates one's questioning/critical thinking. **Larry Sommers and Harvard**

What are the advantages of thinking about troublemaking as a virtue? What are the disadvantages?

Advantage = critically assess the value and the limits of critical thinking/questioning; assess its effectiveness;