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Third Wave Critical Theory
Contingency, Hegemony, Universality
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I. The term “universality” would have to be left permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion. . . . In this sense, I am not doing away with the category, but trying to relieve the category of its foundationalist weight in order to render it as a site of permanent political contest. It is [the] movement of interrogating that ruse of authority that seeks to close itself off from contest that is, in my view, at the heart of any radical political project (41).

—Judith Butler in “Contingent Foundations”

1. All claims must be left open and recognized as ultimately unrealizable.

- “The open-endedness that is essential to democratization implies that the universal cannot be finally identified with any particular content, and that this incommensurability (for which we do not need the Real) is crucial to the futural possibilities of democratic contestation” (161).
- “the commitment to a conception of democracy which is futural, which remains unconstrained by teleology, and which is not commensurate with any of its ‘realizations’, requires a different demand, one which defers realization permanently. . . . democracy is secured precisely through its resistance to realization” (268).
- “whatever goals are achieved (and they are, they are), democracy itself remains unachieved— that particular policy and legislative victories do not exhaust the practice of democracy, and that it is essential to this practice to remain, in some permanent way, unrealizable” (268).

2. This open-endedness and inability to every fully be realized allows for a perpetual contestation of the terms of democracy. This contestation requires that we be critical of our own democratic claims and that we recognize the limits of their realization.

- “The point. . . is not then to answer these questions, but to permit them an opening, to provoke a political discourse that sustains the questions and shows how unknowing any democracy must be about its future. That universality is not speakable outside of a cultural language, but its articulation does not imply that an adequate language is available. It means only that when we speak its name, we do not escape our language, although we can —and must—push its limits” (41).
- “The effort to retrieve and re-elaborate a radical democratic theory for our time therefore demands a critical relationship to ‘realization’ itself: how ought such ideals to be realized, if they are to be realized? Through what means, and at what price? Do these ideals justify any and all means of implementation? . . . what happens to our sense of futurity, and the futurity which is essential to democracy itself, understood as an open-ended process, one whose ‘closure’ would be its death, whose realization—to re-cite Marx—would be its loss” (268)?

- “such claims do not return us to a wisdom we already have, but provoke a set of questions that show how profound our sense of not-knowing is and must be as we lay claim to the norms of political principle” (41).

3. This contestation does not point to the impossibility of politics . . .

- “to question a form of activity or a conceptual terrain is not to banish or censor it; it is, for the duration, to suspend its ordinary play in order to ask after its constitution” (264).
-“a concept can be put under erasure and played at the same time.: that there is no reason, for instance, not to continue to interrogate and to use the concept of ‘universality’.” (264).

“it seems important sometimes to let certain signifiers stand, assume a status of givenness, at a certain moment of analysis, if only to see how they work as they are put to use in the context of a reading, especially when they have become forbidden territory within a dominant discourse. This willingness to let the signifier congeal at the moment of use is not the same as putting that same signifier off-limits. . . .The fact that I agree to use the term does not mean that I take it as a ‘given’, but only to insist upon its importance (269-270).

4. . . . but serves as the source of its future transformation.

- “the reason for preserving the ideality of democracy, its resistance to a full or final realization, is precisely to ward off its dissolution” (269).
- “I presume that the point of hegemony on which we [EI, SZ, and JB] might concur is precisely the ideal of a possibility that exceeds every attempt at a final realization, one which gains its vitality precisely from its non-coincidence with any present reality. What makes this non-coincidence vital is its capacity to open up new fields of possibility, and, thus, to instill hope where a sense of fatality is always threatening to close down political thinking altogether” (162).

II. This is not to say that there is no foundation, but rather, that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering, a contestation. That such foundations exist only to be put into question is, as it were, the permanent risk of the process of democratization. To refuse that contest is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus. . . . In a sense, this risk is the foundation. . . (51).

—Judith Butler in “Contingent Foundations”

The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm “in the right way,” one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. And yet, without a repetition that risks life—in its current organization—how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively reconfigure the contours of the condition of life (28-29)?

—Judith Butler in *Psychic Life of Power*

Consider the above statements about risk in relation to Butler's discussion of making political claims by "put[ti ng] your body on the line" in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (178).

"There is a phrase in US politics, which has its equivalents elsewhere, which suggests something about the somatic dimension of the political claim. It is the exhortation: 'Put your body on the line'. The line is usually understood to be the police line, the line over which you may not step without threat of police violence. But it is also the line of human bodies in the plural which make a chain of sorts and which, collectively, exert the physical force of collective strength. It is not easy, as a writer, to put one's body on the line, for the line is usually the line that is written, the one that bears only an indirect trace of the body that is its condition."

- Why does Butler use this phrase to describe how to make political claims?
- What exactly is she suggesting?
- Is this another example of Butler's notion of risk?
- Can we use this to develop an ethic?
- What would an ethic of risk look like?
- What kind of claims would it make?