

Multiaccental coalitions, dialogic grief and carnivalesque assemblies: Judith Butler and Mikhail Bakhtin meet in the world of ethics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**John M. Roberts** 

Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University, Uxbridge, UK

Abstract

This article for the first time seeks to bring together theoretical insights from Judith Butler and Mikhail Bakhtin in order to strengthen their respective understanding of ethics. First, the article suggests that Bakhtin's theory of dialogic events and the 'multiacculturality' and thematic nature of everyday utterances can help Butler address criticisms that suggest her work concentrates too heavily on invariant meanings in utterances. Second, Butler's theory of coalitions can usefully politicise Bakhtin's ideas on utterances, while her ethics of grief is a crucial way to think about how we forge bonds with the 'Other'. Correspondingly, Bakhtin's theory of the ethical 'I' adds an important moment of 'empathy' to Butler's account of grief and the 'Other'. Third, Butler's theory of state hegemony and counter-hegemonic assemblies can provide an important addition to Bakhtin's theory, while Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque democracy strengthens Butler's insights on equality in assemblies and occupying a liveable life.

Keywords

Judith Butler, Mikhail Bakhtin, assemblies, ethics, carnivalesque, coalitions, dialogue, grief

Introduction

Some previous approaches to Judith Butler's work on ethics have tended to either concentrate on how she articulates an ethics of recognition (e.g. [Butler 2004a](#); [2004b](#): 46)

Corresponding author:

John M. Roberts, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University, Marie Jahoda Building, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK.

Email: John.Roberts@brunel.ac.uk

in the tradition of notable thinkers like [Habermas \(1996\)](#) and [Honneth \(1992\)](#) (see [Ferrarese 2011](#)), or they focus on how Butler (e.g. [Butler 2006](#): 198; 2015: 57-8) explores how ethical relations in fact construct power relations between people (see [Lepold 2018](#)). My purpose in this article, however, is to move these debates in a different direction. I want to argue that while Butler makes a vital contribution to a critical theory of ethics, language, power and social identities, her work would greatly benefit by incorporating some of the insights from Mikhail Bakhtin, who also writes extensively on these areas. But why Bakhtin?

In the past, of course, Butler has chastised other critical thinkers, such as Pierre [Bourdieu \(1991\)](#), for developing an over-elaborate theory of social context that proves to be too deterministic to the performative powers of agency (see [Butler 1997](#): 147; 1999: 117-118). Yet, for some critics, Butler presents a similar problem in her theoretical framework. In some of her writings (e.g. [Butler 2006](#): xv), Butler suggests that social identities, such as ‘heterosexuality’, are performed through the reiteration of relatively stable norms embodied in taken-for-granted practices. But in making this claim, according to critics, Butler reproduces in a new way the idea that people simply internalise ‘norms’ from on high and then ‘perform’ these in social contexts. For critics, this account thereby underplays how specific social contexts are mediated through unique and often contradictory discourses that always offer innovative means to re-negotiate established norms in ways that can re-define them. That is to say, social contexts never mechanically reproduce discursive norms of identities. While this criticism of Butler’s work is overstated, there is arguably nevertheless a truism to it in parts of her writings (see below). Or, more charitably, Butler is not always as clear as she might be in some of her writings on how all discourses contain the seeds of their own subversion, which then leads, rightly or wrongly, to some to argue she displays residues of determinism.

For the first time (as far as I am aware), the article argues that the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his colleagues, especially P. Medvedev and V.N. Voloshinov, can help to develop and support some of Butler’s ethical ideas, in this respect. Indeed, this confluence is not merely fortuitous. There are some remarkable similarities in the theoretical topics addressed by both Butler and Bakhtin. Both, for example, explore moments when meanings in utterances can be challenged, and both write extensively on ethical relations between the ‘I’ and ‘Other’. Both also devote considerable space in their respective works to analysing and understanding power relations in discourse and language and how these relations impact the formation of social identities. Finally, both are interested in how social groups might form coalitions and collectivities in public assemblies and public spaces in and against dominant discourses.

Still, there are also some differences in their respective ideas. Concepts and terms such as dialogic events, utterances, themes and meaning arising from the work of Bakhtin in particular can highlight how ‘norms’ are not relatively stable in social contexts but are contradictory, dilemmatic and ‘multiaccental’. This is because discourse and language refract the complexities of power relations and social struggles evident in different social systems and during dialogic events in diverse social contexts. The article argues that these ideas from Bakhtin can help to strengthen some of Butler’s similar ideas on discourse and identity. But the relationship here is not one way. Butler’s ideas can, in turn, also help to

strengthen some of Bakhtin's ideas. While Bakhtin suggests that people enter the dialogical ideological horizons of others, he is less clear how these relations can become politicised. Butler, on the other hand, usefully develops the term, coalitions, to explore exactly this issue. Furthermore, Butler gives greater analytical weight to how the state seeks to constrain and organise its own hegemonic coalitions through an array of measures, not least by constructing discursive narratives around which identities and groups deserve to be 'grieved' about should harms be inflicted on them. Both Butler's and Bakhtin's insights can thus be fruitfully brought together to develop an ethical politics, especially in the realm of a politics of coalitions, assemblies and carnivalesque public space.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section sets out some typical criticisms made of Butler's theory of discourse and norms, which congeal around the point that she underplays how norms always operate in specific contexts of power. I show that while this criticism is ultimately unfair to Butler, there is an element of truth to it. I draw on Bakhtin's insights to provide a more robust understanding of social context that at the same time supports Butler's own theoretical observations on discourse and language.

Following this discussion, the second main section shows that Butler's theory of coalitional politics and an ethics of grief can usefully develop some of the Bakhtin's insights on these issues and, indeed, politicise them. I then argue, however, that Bakhtin (1984a: 59) pays more attention to the 'I' in its ethical relationship with the 'Other', and this acts as a corrective to Butler's somewhat excessive concern with the 'Other'. By bringing the 'I' back in to the ethical relationship with the 'Other', Bakhtin consolidates Butler's ethics exploring in greater detail that 'I' is an active, dialogic and participatory being during dialogic events with the 'Other' and should be theorised as such.

The third main section maps out how Butler expands her theoretical insights to discuss radical assemblies in public space constituted through *coalitional alliances* between different people (Butler 2015: 159) that challenge state hegemonic projects built on precarity and dispossession (Butler 2015: 137-8). Bakhtin makes similar arguments about the progressive nature of what he terms as carnivalesque democracy and carnivalesque public squares (Bakhtin 1984a; 1984b). I suggest that Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque democracy bequeaths a vital dialogical and multiaccental form to Butler's crucial theory of assemblies. A theory of carnivalesque democracy also ensures that a theory of progressive assemblies pays due attention to issues around creative human flourishing. The section ends by setting out points of fruitful points of correspondence between Butler's and Bakhtin's respective ethical viewpoints, which serve to develop and strengthen each of them. In conclusion, the article argues that Butler's critical use of Austin's speech act theory in actual fact moves her away from Austin towards Bakhtin.

Language, norms and social contexts

Butler's arguments are based in a theory of performativity that stipulates people first act, and in acting, make a claim about their identities and the norms that constitute their identities. By 'performing' our identities over time, and through repetition, we also take on and embody certain 'norms'. For Butler, language is an important moment in this performative moment because language enjoys the power to bring about new situations or set of effects. For example, 'gender' is established before and then during birth by medical professionals ticking boxes on forms, using words and phrases to describe the gender of a new born baby, and so forth (Butler 2015: 29). Yet, Butler also insists that words can escape their original context and original intentions and be transformed into words of resistance (Butler 1997: 14; see also Bunch 2013: 44). Norms can start to breakdown and be challenged when people create a gap between their physical self and how this physical self is normatively represented. A person who considers undergoing sex reassignment will engage in dialogue about, and challenge, certain gender norms they have been assigned since birth. For Butler, then, performative utterances can 'break with prior contexts, with the possibility of inaugurating contexts yet to come' (Butler 1997: 151-2; see also Butler 1999: 117-118; 2006: xv). Butler therefore appears to reject a monologic position in favour of one that stresses the discursive and dialogic nature of identity. As she observes:

It would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of 'women' that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete. The assumption of its essential incompleteness permits that category to serve as a permanently available site of contested meanings. The definitional incompleteness of the category might then serve as a normative ideal relieved of coercive force (Butler 2006: 20-1; see also Butler 2015: 57-8).

Rothenberg and Valente (1997: 298) nevertheless claim that Butler often adopts an intentionalist vision of the subject in which *relatively stable norms* of gender are challenged over time by an *individual* who produces intended subversions of the norms. Famously, for example, Butler suggests that drag queens can potentially subvert gender norms by parodying them (Butler 2006: 187-8). According to Rothenberg and Valente, such examples fall back on the idea that performance refers to an individual performance in which the *intended* effect by the performer is understood and accepted by an audience comprised by a universal 'we' (Rothenberg and Valente 1997: 300). The universal 'we' is itself predicated on people sharing the same or similar meanings about identities. So, for instance, Butler argues that through repetition of everyday acts, we internalise a relatively stable set of norms about gender. Butler then seeks to ascertain which 'non-normative sexual practices call into question' relatively stable gender identities (Butler 2006: xi). We therefore acquire gender identities through 'a regulated process of repetition' (Butler 2006: 198). 'Normative heterosexuality' is one dominant and relatively stable gender identity that polices gender and ensures that gender norms remain in place through constant repetition (Butler 2006: xii) to become the 'unspoken...requirements of the

subject' (Butler 2006: 8). Thus the 'subject' that 'resists' these norms is a relatively unified subject to begin with. Indeed, different identities are thought to be secondary and superfluous to dominant unified norms insofar that that 'resistance itself is performed inside those norms and is made possible by them' (Hekman 2014: 456).

Schwartzman (2002) further contends that norms are only questioned for Butler once they are performativity challenged in new contexts and start to fail over time because the norms begin to come up against unique bodies and socio-cultural forces to those that existed in the norms' original context (see Butler 1997: 145). An injurious racist or sexual slur through time leaves its original context in which it was uttered and arrives in new contexts to 'enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine' of new bodies (Butler 1997: 159). At this moment, in a new historical context, different bodies can therefore 'disorient that cultural sense' of the injurious word' by 'expropriating the discursive means' of how the injurious word was produced in the first place. These words thereby gain a 'non-ordinary' usage in particular contexts (Butler 1997: 145). The word, 'queer', for example, has been expropriated by gay, bi, lesbian and transsexual activists in the present to break the past injurious content of this word and re-deploy it for progressive activism and a possible 'insurrectionary moment of that history, the moment that founds a future through a break with that past' (Butler 1997: 159). For Schwartzman, however, Butler veers near a position that underplays how language always operates in distinctive social contexts and their unique configurations of power. A social context is 'never really definable' in Butler's theory, and so 'there is no way that racism, sexism, and homophobia can be thought of as having the power or authority they would need to have in order for racist and sexist hate speech to be considered injurious ...' (Schwartzman 2002: 431; see also Walker 2017: 153). As a result, Butler sidesteps questions about the constitution and operation of authority and power in real empirical contexts. Words and utterances in and of themselves do not injure others, but spoken in specific contexts, then they can do so (Schwartzman 2002: 433).

While these critical points are well taken, they are not so far apart from Butler's theoretical insights on these very same issues. After all, Butler does present in various guises a contextual analysis and understanding of utterances (Butler 1997: 87; 2009: 143-4; see also below). Saying that, there is a sense in which Butler appears to imply in some areas of her writings, even if unintentionally, that norms acquire relatively stable discursive meanings within a social context before they change their meaning in a new context. After all, Butler says in some of her writings that the 'insurrectionary moment' in language norms only emerges through well-known explicit political acts. Butler presents the example of Rosa Parks, the African American civil rights activist, who in 1955 refused to sit in 'coloured-only' seats of a bus in Alabama. For Butler, Parks had no prior authorisation to sit in 'White-only' seats, yet Parks, 'endowed a certain authority on the act, and *began* the insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy' (Butler 1997: 147; added emphasis). Behind Rosa Parks, however, and this is a point not elaborated upon by Butler in this particular discussion, lay a history of civil rights social movements and civil rights activists, who had been creatively building qualitative distinct and interconnected dialogic events and public spheres in US society for many years through an array of campaign tactics to challenge racist discourses and

policies (see e.g. [Romano and Raiford 2006](#)). Butler, though, does not mention this civil rights activism, which had been previously ongoing through both small acts of defiance and large acts of resistance before Parks sat on the Whites-only bus, but she instead gives the impression that Parks was the spark that lit the civil rights movement and its challenge to 'Whites-only' norms.

What the above discussion further alludes to is the broader point that each word is an utterance with an 'inner dialectical quality' embedded in its very core because refracts the contradictory and conflictual nature of the world in the past and present. A word's meaning not only refracts conflicts and dilemmas in the history of a community of speakers but also a word's meaning can be appropriated and transformed into new themes by a wide variety of social groups in different contexts ([Voloshinov 1973](#): 23). Theme of an utterance is thus unique to a social context and so cannot be reproduced in another context, whereas a word's meaning can operate across contexts. 'The theme is the expression of the concrete, historical situation that engendered the utterance' ([Voloshinov 1973](#): 99). Theme and meaning exist in a dialectical relationship, and no understanding of one can be comprehensively accomplished without an understanding of the other (see also [Bakhtin 1981](#): 293). A word thereby delineates the simplest expression of both concrete and abstract discourse and the same word is 'multiaccentual' within *and* between social contexts.

For Bakhtin, dialogue is therefore always refracted at a concrete level through wider sociological factors, such as 'the title, class, rank, wealth, social importance, and age of the addressee and the relative position of the speaker ...' ([Bakhtin 1986](#): 96; see also [Voloshinov 1973](#): 19-20). As well as monologic words and utterances which seek to centralise, unify and dominate the meanings of norms, there are, therefore, 'heteroglossic' utterances that seek to destabilise these uniaccentual meanings of norms through thematic use in specific contexts.

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. And this active participation of every utterance in living heteroglossia determines the linguistic profile and style of the utterance to no less a degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language ([Bakhtin 1981](#): 272; added emphasis).

There are three points to be made here. First, heteroglossia recognises the dilemmatic and contradictory nature social life. Second, heteroglossia seeks to employ and play with these dilemmas and contradictions in order to bring about 'a more fundamental speech diversity' within a social context ([Bakhtin 1981](#): 326). Third, heteroglossia aims to analyse and unpack how our social identities and utterances are mediated through various processes of socialisation and conflicts and struggles between dominant and dominated classes and groups ([Voloshinov 2012](#): 140).

Butler's (1997) claim, then, that there is a 'disjuncture between utterance and meaning', which enables the utterance, through its repetition, to be employed in another context and gain new meaning, *can be strengthened* through Bakhtin's insights. The 'disjuncture' that Butler rightly highlights is in fact based in its very 'inner dialectical' nature that is reproduced into a further relationship between meaning *and* theme. To give one illustration, Butler says that the word, 'freedom', has been used throughout modern societies as a way in which excluded others, such as 'women, people of colour', have been oppressed in the very name of 'freedom'. Struggles against the very exclusion that 'freedom' has created can nevertheless become re-appropriated in new contexts, 'in order to configure a different future' (Butler 1997: 160). 'Freedom', in new contexts, has therefore come to have more progressive meanings, such as 'freedom from slavery' or 'freedom from patriarchy'. But what Butler underestimates here is that the word, 'freedom', is in fact *already* a contradictory utterance *before* it leaves a context and enters a new one. After all, the core of capitalism is structured by the essential and internal contradiction that people are free from owning the means of production, but also free to sell one's labour to whomever will purchase it (Marx 1988). 'Freedom', then, contains both 'negative' meanings ('freedom from') and 'positive' meanings ('freedom to') within its very core. This is because, like many utterances and signs, 'freedom' is a social product of historically specific class and social struggles (see Wood 2012). As such, the contradictory *meaning* of freedom is reproduced into distinctive and unique multiaccultural *themes* about freedom during actual dialogic events among people, groups and organisations. Bakhtin thereby demonstrates that the 'disjuncture between utterance and meaning' is far more radically contingent than Butler suggests.

But if Bakhtin can lend some theoretical support to Butler, it is also true to say that Butler can lend theoretical support to Bakhtin. It is not always clear in Bakhtin's work how the multiaccultural nature of utterances might move through different identities, and, indeed, how these utterances and identities might then be brought together in and against networks of power. Butler's work provides vital pointers and signs of how this does occur. For Butler, social identities are constituted and lived through different social relations. Separate identity 'categories' live through 'the conditions of articulation *for* each other: How is race lived in the modality of sexuality? How is gender lived in the modality of race? How do colonial and neo-colonial nation-states rehearse gender relations in the consolidation of state power?' (Butler 1993: 117). Once such questions are posed, it becomes possible to further explore how social identities are also bound up with that which it excludes and includes (Butler 1993: 117). We now expand on this important element of Butler's theoretical insights.

Multiaccultural coalitions and dialogic grief

Bakhtin argues that we are dialogical beings who, among other things, exist for others through our utterances. As he notes:

each individual utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication. It has clear-cut boundaries that are determined by the change of speech subjects (speakers), but within these

boundaries the utterance, like Leibniz's monad, reflects the speech process, others' utterances, and, above all, the preceding links in the chain (sometimes close and sometimes - in areas of cultural communication - very distance) (Bakhtin 1987: 93).

A word is therefore 'half someone else's' and 'lies on the borderline between oneself and the other' (Bakhtin 1981: 293; see also Bakhtin 1990: 274). But while Bakhtin clearly states that each person lives a 'borderline' existence with others (see Haynes 2013: 18), it is not always clear from Bakhtin's work how these 'heteroglot' opinions might form themselves into an overt politics of progressive dissent and resistance (see e.g. Brandist 2002).

It is here that Butler's ideas on coalitional politics prove to be extremely valuable in developing Bakhtin's thoughts on this matter. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999) notes that a coalitional politics represents an 'unpredictable assemblage of positions' between the different people in the coalition. This 'unpredictable' moment of a coalition is premised on those within it being willing to discuss contradictions and dilemmas in the relations between themselves in the coalition itself, including divergences, breakages, splinters and fragmentation in these relations. Dialogue in real life is always mediated through the likes of ideologies, inequalities, identities, power relations and social divisions. A coalition does not ignore these, but it draws upon them in its democratic politics within the coalition itself and in its activism beyond the coalition. Otherwise, the coalition will veer towards instituting a liberal political public in which these divisions and power relations are bracketed. A coalition does not therefore seek 'unity' within its ranks as such, but, rather, it forms 'provisional unities' that focus on concrete issues; provisional unities that gain purpose through those concrete issues rather than a unified identity.

In *Frames of War*, Butler develops her thoughts on coalitional politics. She says that to understand what a 'coalitional politics' might be, we need first to understand what will constitute the parts of a coalition. She firstly criticises the idea, often found in liberal theories, that people who enter into communication and dialogue with one another should exercise 'tolerance reciprocally' during the communicative exchange. Problematically, argues Butler, this viewpoint is founded in a possible dilemma from the onset. Toleration is based on two subjects who are considered as being differentiated from one another at the start of the communicative exchange. In practice, this can mean that two subjects are brought together – 'homosexuals' and 'Muslims' – who might have to 'repress' their 'differentiation' in order to engage in 'meaningful' communication with one another. Another liberal scenario is that of 'recognition' in the sense that one enters a communicative exchange based on recognising the other's identity. But, as Butler observes, we need to ask here, 'what is it precisely that would be "recognised"?' (Butler 2009: 141). For example, in the case of a gay man, is it their 'homosexuality' that should be recognised, or in the case of a person who is a Muslim, their religion? Or do we 'recognise' their antagonistic differences with other identities, and do we employ pre-existing normative frameworks to gain answers? It is at this point that Butler focuses on the importance of contexts – an area as we know that some critics say she neglects. Normative frameworks, after all, often miss the complexities and subtleties of how social relation operates in everyday social contexts. 'To say that there are rules against homosexuality within Islam

is not yet to say how people live in relation to such rules or taboos, or how such rules and taboos vary in their intensity or centrality, depending on the specific religious *contexts and practices* at issue' (Butler 2009: 143-4; added emphasis).

Butler radicalises Bakhtin by talking in detail about how people come together in and against limitations of liberal democracy – a topic we return to in the next section. Butler's work in this area does imply that norms are inherently multiaccental and so do not have what Bakhtin terms as being the sort of 'force of compulsoriness' found in normative linguistic structures but enjoy a 'freer' normative quality (see Bakhtin 1986: 87; see also Voloshinov 1973: 20). At the same time, Bakhtin's notion of 'dialogic event' usefully extends and develops Butler's use of context, in this respect. In, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin argues that each person reproduces their identity through 'eventness'. For Bakhtin, 'eventness' refers to a type of 'participatory' being that underlines the 'once-occurrent' Being that is grounded in 'acts' and in 'deeds' (Bakhtin 1993: 8). Instead of relatively stable norms 'determinate and valid in themselves as *moral norm*' (Bakhtin 1993: 6), real-life occurs in the unique and non-repeatable, 'actually performed act' (Bakhtin 1993: 28). In other words, Being is first of all felt as 'Being-as-event' with others and is therefore also an *answerable* act (Bakhtin 1993: 12).¹

Certainly, Butler also says something similar on this topic when she notes that ethical responsibility occurs when the 'I' finds that it exists in an excess, namely, an excess of social relations and their norms. To give an account of itself, the 'I' must also give an account of a set of relations and their norms (Butler 2005: 7-8). And it is the power of the 'Other' that ultimately directs ethical responsibility. It is through a mode of *address* by the other that ethical responsibility arises in the first place (Butler 2005: 84). Butler thus suggests that we gain a sense of our uniqueness to the extent that we are 'addressed' by an 'Other', and when an 'I' acts in the world it is a 'world whose structure is in large part not of my making' (Butler 2005: 132). Again, though, Butler can significantly add to Bakhtin's thinking on this issue by showing how coalitions are built, in part, on the relationship between 'I' and 'Other' and ethical relationships between them.

Elsewhere, Butler argues we are all vulnerable to the extent that we gain our identities by being attached to others. We all experience loss when we lose somebody close to us. But we are also vulnerable to the extent that we might suffer violence against us in some way depending on our social identities. Women and certain 'minorities' are subject to higher degrees of potential violence, for example, and in some circumstances, physically dispossessed of one's locality by violence (Butler 2004b: 20-3). Vulnerability therefore incites loss, and with loss comes a transformative effect, which cannot be charted or known in advance. Most visibly, loss can induce grief in a person, and through grief, we are immediately aware that stories about 'I' are mediated by, and often undone through, relations with an 'Other'. So, we are 'dispossessed' in our identities exactly because our identities are for ourselves but also 'a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another' (Butler 2004b: 24).

Feeling vulnerable, feeling grief and feeling dispossessed, these are all distinctly human characteristics, for Butler. And a vital part of these human characteristics is their relationships, or relationality, to others. Grief can pose the following question: 'What is it in the Other that I have lost?' (Butler 2004b: 30). An 'opacity' with oneself therefore

haunts insofar that each person only comes to know themselves through normative relations with others (Butler 2005: 8). So, when posing the question, ‘what makes for a grievable life?’, Butler suggests that one answer is ‘to appeal to a “we”, for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all’ (Butler 2004b: 20). We are therefore awake to the precariousness in the ‘Other’, its potential defencelessness, yet, the ‘Other’ provides the very basis for our sense of self. To do violence to the ‘Other’ is therefore do commit violence to oneself (Butler 2000a: 18; 2004b: 138-9). But what Bakhtin can then add to Butler’s observations on coalitional politics and ethical relations is the point that active empathizing needs to retain the uniqueness of each ‘I’. When experiencing another’s emotions, such as suffering, ‘I’ give them a new form, which is also different my experiences of the same emotion. Empathizing and understanding do not simply mirror the emotions of the ‘Other’ as such, but they instead create a new valuation (Bakhtin 1990: 103). As a result, ‘empathizing actualizes something that did not exist either in the object of empathizing or in myself prior to the act of emphasizing, and through this actualized something Being-as-event is enriched’ (Bakhtin 1993: 15). These are important aspects to highlight because they feed into and, indeed, strengthen Butler’s and Bakhtin’s respective theories of political dissent in public spaces. We therefore move on to this topic.

Carnavalesque assemblies and the state

Bakhtin argues that a monologic approach to discourse is fixated first of all on how relatively stable norms attached to certain identities are reproduced in relatively stable social contexts, and only come to be challenged over time. A monologic approach thereby views speech as having ‘uniaccentual’ normative meanings attached to them that congeal into a single worldview in specific social contexts (Bakhtin 1984a: 204). Monologic discourse is often portrayed by Bakhtin as that belonging to dominant groups in society. However, and apart from a few elusive comments, Bakhtin tends not to say much about how monologic discourse might be mediated through formal mechanisms of power, such as state projects striving for hegemony.

This is not the case with Butler. She is very explicit in discussing how the state will, among other things, seek to create discursive and historical schemes that justify why some in society are deemed more worthy than others and, more worthy to be grieved about should harms be inflicted on them (Butler 2020: 63-4 and 136; see also Butler 2009: 149). The state therefore tries to co-op some groups and organisations into its hegemonic project, while condemning and marginalising others. One powerful state partner in this respect is the media, which will often ‘frame’ events in certain ways congruent with a state project. Through these mechanisms, the state will create a number of historically specific ‘evaluative’ and ‘normative frameworks’ that set out ‘ontological givens’ around ‘subject, culture, identity and religion’ (Butler 2009: 149). For example, those fleeing persecution in their home country to ‘become’ migrants in another country, are often represented by forces in the state and some sections of the media as ‘unreal’, as not having ‘names, faces, personal histories, family, favourite hobbies, and so forth (Butler 2004b: 32). These

‘unreal’ people are portrayed as being unworthy of grief – they are ‘dereal’. Grievability is subsequently unequally distributed in society (Butler 2022: 93).

For Butler, however, counter-hegemonic coalitions can nevertheless form in and against state hegemony – ‘to certain state and other regulatory policies that effect exclusions, abjections, partially or fully suspended citizenship, subordination, debasement, and the like’ (Butler 2009: 147). People will every so often come together not through fixed identities, but because they oppose specific socio-historical policies and state hegemonic projects. These socio-historical conditions also therefore structure and mediate moral reactions to events in the world. Butler further maintains that some of the most powerful counter-hegemonic coalitional movements occur in the public spaces of assemblies. Whether these assemblies are associated with global movements, like the Occupy Movement, Arab Spring and the so-called movement-parties who combine social movement activism with parliamentary politics (see della Porta et al. 2017), or whether they are related with ‘ordinary’ community events in countries in which campaigners and protestors demonstrate in well-known urban public spaces (see Davies 2021), they all provide resources to construct insurrectionary speech.

According to Butler, when people enter public spaces to practise dissent, they do so to form what is often a spontaneous assembly. They can bring this assembly to life through words and utterances, but there are of course further expressive and performative acts – dancing, standing in silence and sitting in a road – which likewise do so. Assemblies thus challenge the limits of certain hegemonic norms. For example, some hegemonic norms ‘recognise’ in the main only those democratic claims that operate within the boundaries of liberal parliamentary mechanisms. Assemblies challenge these liberal democratic norms by creating new public demands, new visibilities and new democratic spaces in the likes of public squares in cities. One vital condition of this type of assembly is that people come together through ‘equality’ and then enact further claims of ‘equality’ as the assembly becomes more visible. Being dispossessed in society of basic goods and needs is often one further point of discussion in assemblies (Butler 2015: 52-8). For Butler, this form of assembly is thus different to right-wing and hegemonic assemblies. These latter assemblies do not wish to institutionalise equality and to struggle for a world which becomes ‘liveable for those who have not yet been valued as living beings’ (Butler 2015: 183). Still, and building on the discussion in previous sections, there are also two interrelated reasons why Butler does not go far enough in her account of assemblies.

First, while Butler importantly highlights the socio-political and monologic framing of identities and counter-hegemonic resistance to this framing, she does so by underestimating the creative powers of distinctive identities within assemblies of dissent. Butler sometimes seems to collapse the different creative and individual energies that are evident in a coalition into the somewhat homogenous identity of the assembly. For example, Butler notes that, ‘*showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts liveable life at the forefront of politics*’ (Butler 2015: 18; added emphasis). When people, strangers, come together to form an assembly in this way, argues Butler, they are simultaneously demanding a right to appear in public, to be recognised by dominant powers, and to have their lives been seen to be valuable and to be valued. They

are thus exercising their right to appear and exercising their freedom beyond hegemonic norms.

While highlighting important attributes of an assembly, Butler's insights nonetheless understate one important quality of assemblies, which is their ability to build a place for a variety of dialogic events and spaces to flourish – different speakers on platforms, different people listening, groups standing together debating and discussing issues and so on – that then, in turn, reproduce real-life assemblies (see [Roberts 2023](#)). Each dialogic event in the wider space of an assembly will embody assorted coalitions whose members will momentarily come together in these dialogic spaces to exercise and often develop their own unique creative energies within the wider place of the assembly itself.

Second, and related to the previous point, one sometimes gains the impression from Butler that by simply taking part in an assembly – by simply attending it – one is making a radical gesture in and of itself. But this viewpoint is in danger of collapsing different types of dissent, resistance and power into one homogenous mass rather than trying to grapple with qualitative dimensions to these issues. Think momentarily about how Butler further describes freedom of assembly. She notes this should not be conceptualised as being part of an abstract liberal theory of rights, but it should instead be seen as part of a broader coalitional alliance between different people ([Butler 2015](#): 159). Freedom of assembly thus rejects liberal abstract rights in favour of taking to the streets to gain concrete rights and to challenge precarity and dispossession through state hegemonic projects ([Butler 2015](#): 137-8). Assemblies do not therefore only make assertions but also make political enactments. Assemblies can certainly engage in a struggle with state hegemony over democratic utterances, such as the Occupy slogan, 'we are the 99%'. But such utterances are also vocalised performances because they enact the social coalition and plurality that they name. Utterances around insurrectionary expressions do not so much describe that plurality, as they gather up people to act within it ([Butler 2015](#): 176).

According to Fraser, however, Butler tends to miss important qualitative dimensions to such practices. One reading of Butler's work, Fraser tells us, is to claim that dominant discourses 'exclude' particular social identities, and so 'resistance' by dominated social identities to such exclusions is nearly always seen as being positive. Yet, as Fraser observes:

Where such exclusions do exist, are they all bad? Are they all equally bad? Can we distinguish legitimate from illegitimate exclusions, better from worse practices of subjection? ([Fraser 1995](#): 68).

In some respects, Fraser's critical remarks allude to an earlier problem noted in Butler's work, which is that Butler occasionally gives the impression that 'insurrectionary speech' spontaneously emerges almost from nowhere rather than being the effect of numerous and qualitatively distinct dialogic events in past and present contexts.

Butler of course does provide answers of sorts in her later work to Fraser when she discusses state hegemonic projects and counter-hegemonic coalitions. In terms of the latter, Butler wants to insist that coalitions are their most potent when they insist on equality between members that, at the same time, recognises the fragmented nature of

identities within the ‘impossible unity’ of a coalition. Dialogue within the counter-hegemonic coalition group therefore must acknowledge ‘divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation’ between those in the coalition. Each singular identity associated with the likes of ‘age’, ‘class’, ‘gender’ or ‘race’ itself remains ‘incomplete’ because it will always be a site of potential contested meanings rather than a completed and unified identity (Butler 1999: 19-22). There are, then, qualitative differences at play in counter-hegemonic coalitions depending on the coalition itself, how it has been formed, and what dominant hegemonic project it is formed in and against.

Butler’s points also chime well with Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogic events. But Bakhtin also says something noticeably different to Butler on these issues associated with assemblies. He develops the term, ‘carnavalesque’, to analyse and describe this form of assembly. Similar to Butler, Bakhtin argues that a progressive and radical form of speech can be located in free and familiar contact. This form of freedom is itself related to a special type of equality, namely, the ‘suspension of all hierarchical precedence’. Here, free and familiar contact requires that ‘the barriers of caste, property, profession and age’ are removed. The reason for removing these social barriers is that ‘special forms of marketplace speech and gesture’ can be encouraged’, which are ‘frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 10). Elsewhere, Bakhtin names these carnivalesque places of radical democracy as carnivalesque public squares (Bakhtin 1984b: 130).

Bakhtin, like Butler, also employs the term, ‘equality’, to describe this carnivalesque freedom. Carnavalesque equality, however, is related to the ‘suspension of all hierarchical precedence’ in which ‘the barriers of caste, property, profession and age’ being removed. This leads to ‘the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 10; see also Bakhtin 1984a: 123). Most importantly, this creates an equality formed by ‘the people’, which is ‘outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socio-economic and political organization...’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 255). Equality is thus premised on ‘free and familiar contact’ among people to come together in a genuine collectivity in which people can celebrate, ‘the victory of all the people’s material abundance, freedom, equality, brotherhood’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 256).

Carnavalesque democracy is therefore one based in *real* equality that includes ‘material abundance’ by overcoming specific socioeconomic *and* political inequalities. In this respect, Bakhtin is asking us to support a principle of democracy that refuses to separate civil society (institutions that bring people together in a ‘brotherhood’ *and* socio-economic equality) from the state (political organisations). So, Bakhtin presents us with a radical type of democracy that criticises the very liberal (and capitalistic) separation between economic democracy from political democracy. Instead, he calls for radical participation and inclusivity among people in economic and political forums. Bakhtin subsequently argues for a participatory type of democracy in which society is viewed as an integrated albeit contradictory ‘whole’ that ‘embraces all the people’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 7).

Bakhtin's observations on carnivalesque democracy can thus be fruitfully merged with Butler's account of assemblies and coalitional counter-hegemonic politics. First, a coalitional politics is at its strongest and most compelling when it enables its members to enact their distinctive capacities to their maximum, and enable a person to creatively develop his or her distinctive personality. This occurs when the coalition not only campaigns for political or cultural equality but also campaigns for socio-economic equality as well to ensure real equal rights and real freedom is attainable for every person. On this understanding, a democratic society is one that rests on the ability of each person to use and develop their capacities in a manner that does not seek to control, through unequal power relations, others using their capabilities equally and freely. Carnavalesque democracy is, furthermore, imbued with 'free and critical *historical* consciousness' (Bakhtin 1984b: 73) in two senses. It recognises that democratic coalitional movements in the present build upon dialogic events from past coalitional movement strategies, but carnivalesque democracy also engages in debate and discussion about the historical specificity of certain power relations and contradictions in the present. As a result, carnivalesque democracy is a democracy that draws on the past and present to look to the future; to a place where the 'timeless stability' of the dominant order is subject to 'change and renewal' and eventually replaced by a participatory democracy (Bakhtin 1984b: 83). Dialogic carnival events in the present therefore provide participatory opportunities that help to generate, 'the creation of unexpected matrices, unexpected connections, including the most surprising logical links...and linguistic connections' (Bakhtin 1981: 169). Butler's discussions on coalitions strengthen Bakhtin's insights on this matter. Similar to Bakhtin, Butler champions the 'definitional incompleteness' of identity 'categories' and their relationship to one another in coalitional formations (Butler 1999: 19-22). Unlike Bakhtin, Butler explicitly places such concerns in critical debates with rival schools of thought, such as variants of liberal theory. As such, Butler brings to the fore a much needed and unequivocal socio-political theoretical slant to these issues.

Second, for human capabilities to flourish, one cannot exist as a monad but should develop capabilities and potentials through events with others. Our 'deeds' and utterances are always 'answerable' to others (Bakhtin 1994: 75). Butler's work on coalitions radicalises and politicises Bakhtin's insights here by placing utterances in the mouths of different 'incomplete' social identities and through an ethics of grief. In grief, we start to build an ethical picture of our own lives in relation to others. We also can begin to understand how the state and its allies, such as some sections of the media, frame grief for us through their hegemonic projects. Progressive counter-hegemonic projects have the potential to build carnivalesque assemblies and use these to think about and publicly discuss grief in different ways. Grief for those who are dispossessed of the material means to develop their creative powers and enjoy human flourishing, such as by developing a critical-rational understanding of the world, aesthetic creation, ethical and moral judgements, friendships and love, spirituality and so forth (see Macpherson 1973: 4-5), can thus be the starting point to mobilise others to build carnivalesque assemblies. This corresponds well to what Butler says about enjoying a 'liveable' and valued life – one in which the call for social equality within an assembly is at the same time the

acknowledgement that all lives and their distinct creative powers are worth safeguarding (Butler 2022: 94).

Third, the state still acts today as the main centralising monologic power in capitalist society, and Butler is right to give it due weight in her analysis. Capitalist state hegemonic projects will stifle certain creative capabilities of some others, particularly those who are viewed as ‘ungrievable’. Assemblies that advocate and practice carnivalesque democracy simultaneously campaign for socio-political and socio-economic equality to overcome forms of dispossession. The system that enables and empowers a few in society (the most powerful one percent, for example) to ‘extract’ the creative powers from others therefore needs to be dismantled in favour a system that socialises these powers for all (Cunningham 2018; Macpherson 1973; Silier 2005). Real freedom and real equality are therefore the self-directed freedom to enhance, rather than to be dispossessed of, one’s own unique creative powers in society. Such a position recognises the distinctiveness of each of us and, at the same time, criticises the idea that we have uniformed identities. Instead, this position explores the relational nature of our unique creative powers and potentials along with how these then become confined, hindered and hampered by hegemonic projects. In this understanding, identities are ‘part of a dynamic map of power in which identities are constituted and/or erased, deployed and/or paralyzed’ (Butler 1993: 117).

Conclusion

Butler’s theory of performativity is informed, in part, by speech act theory. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L Austin suggests that performative words are distinguished by two main characteristics.

- A. they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and
- B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something (Austin 1962: 5).

A well-known example given by Austin of a performative utterance is the announcement at a wedding ceremony, ‘I do take this person to be my wife/husband’. This utterance performs an action in its very nature of an utterance spoken under ‘appropriate circumstances’ and through specific conventions, namely, a legally recognised wedding ceremony. Issuing a performative is therefore performing an action. Famously, Austin breaks down performatives into a number of subsets: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. Locutionary acts refer to states of affairs and consist of propositional sentences – ‘the act of “saying something” in...full normal sense...or of the full units of speech’ (Austin 1962: 94). For example, one would investigate the ‘phatic’ element of a locutionary speech act, such as whether the speech act contained social pleasantries. Illocutionary acts, however, constitute the performative moment of language in so far that an action is performed by a speaker when they say something, such as ‘I hereby promise you...’. Perlocutionary acts refer to the moment when a speaker produces an effect in the world ensuring that perlocutionary effects exist externally to the meaning

of what is said, such as when a person asks another person, ‘can you pass the salt, please’. An illocutionary act is therefore the performance of act *in* saying something, whereas a perlocutionary act is the performance of an act *by* saying something (Austin 1962: 99).

Butler critically draws on Austin’s speech act theory. She argues that for Austin a performative utterance gains its force by being embedded in ritual-like conditions. Butler agrees with this statement but goes further by suggesting that rituals also exceed their context. Ritualised utterances, instead, are part of a ‘condensed historicity’ to the extent even a single utterance ‘exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of the utterance’ (Butler 1997: 3). In her later work, Butler returns to this issue in her work on the radical potential of assemblies. Butler discusses the democratic phrase, ‘we the people’, which is often invoked and radicalised by popular assemblies like Occupy. According to Butler, this phrase is a speech act, but one that is also inserted into a ‘citational chain’. This means, for Butler, that:

the temporal conditions for making the speech act precede and exceed the momentary occasion of its enunciation. And for yet another reason the speech act, however illocutionary, is not fully tethered to the moment of its enunciation: the social plurality designated and produced by the utterance cannot all assemble in the same place to speak at the same time, so it is both a spatially and temporally extended phenomenon. When and where popular sovereignty – the self-legislative power of the people – is ‘declared’ or, rather, ‘declares itself’, it is not exactly at a single instance, but instead in a series of speech acts or what I would suggest are performative enactments that are not restrictively verbal (Butler 2015: 176).

So, while Butler draws on Austin, she does so to radicalise his ideas by showing how they can be invested with democratic content.

I would argue that in her reworking of speech act theory, Butler is in fact moving towards a position more in line with Bakhtin than with Austin. After all, from a Bakhtinian viewpoint, and a viewpoint that Butler herself implicitly adopts, speech act theory offers a limited approach to understanding real speech situations embedded in dialogic events. As Linell (2009: 182) observes, one problem with speech act theory is its preponderance to explore ideal-typical units of language at some remove from real-life communication. It tends to view language as being employed by individuals in an ‘active initiative’ manner to assert something, or to ask a question, or to make a declaration, or to promise something and so on. But this perspective misses the point that speech operates in and through dialogic events. Dialogic utterances are embedded in answerable relations during dialogic events with others and are mediated through historically specific social relations at different levels of social mediation. Speech act theory, instead, relies on a more monologic approach in which speaker A utters some performative words to speaker B, and then speaker B responds to speaker A. In this scenario, speech acts are carried out in ‘standard conditions’, or ‘normal concomitants’ in Austin’s phrase (Austin 1962: 10). Literal meaning of an utterance is thus seen to match what a speaker actually means when employing a speech act. To put the

same point in slightly different terms, real-life utterances are reduced to the status of being sentences with fixed meanings. Yet, this minimises the point that utterances are not sentences with fixed and transparent meanings which remain identical irrespective of time or space, as such. Utterances, instead, ‘have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day, the hour’ (Bakhtin 1981: 293).

Naturally, each person’s human attributes are also unique to them. One’s productive powers and their needs and desires, capacities, degrees of freedom to act and abilities to reason about an event take on creative, expressive and unique forms for each individual (see Sayers 1998: 146). Participatory acts with the external world and with others, the sort of acts celebrated by Bakhtin during dialogic events, are based in this type of human flourishing of our creative powers, and, indeed, participatory dialogic acts work in tandem with this type of human flourishing. Through creative and unique participatory acts, ‘I’ seek to understand both the motive and aim of my participatory acts in the sense that they have my unique ‘signature’ because ‘I’ am performing the product of dialogue as well as doing so in relationship with others (Bakhtin 1993: 35). My ‘signature’ – how I create a unique emotional-volitional tone to the dialogic event – also instils in me an obligation to the dialogic event. In other words, there is no constant law of a performative act, only ‘an acknowledgment that is once-occurrent and never-repeatable, emotional-volitional and concretely individual’ (Bakhtin 1993: 39).

In my opinion, Butler similarly builds a critical distance towards the origins of speech act theory, and she does so too in a way that helps her to develop her ethical theory. Indeed, there is nothing in Butler’s ideas that would contradict Bakhtin’s insights on this subject-matter. Butler’s ethical insights in fact complement and develop Bakhtin’s insights and vice versa. Butler is explicit that her ethics of grief rests in part on recognising the unique worth of each life – that everyone is worthy of grief should harm be inflicted upon them – and that a liveable and flourishing life require certain social impediments to be removed, while appreciating the impact others have on our own human flourishing (see Butler 2022: 42-4).

But Butler also adds a crucial political dimension to Bakhtin’s ideas. Notably, Butler gives far greater weight to how the state hegemonic projects impact on ethical issues, such as those related to public grief and mourning. Butler also demonstrates how state hegemony has to confront counter-hegemonic forces and their assemblies. For example, Butler shows that even when dominant discourses of the state attempt to ‘foreclose’ certain identities, those very same dominant discourses unintentionally give publicity to those who said to be ‘dereal’ and thereby inaugurate a moment of destabilising the foreclosure of those deemed ‘dereal’ (Butler 2000b: 157-8). In some ways, Butler’s observations here once more correspond well to Bakhtin’s insights that heteroglossic forces will often open up cracks in monologic discourse, which can then slowly build carnivalesque spaces in society. Together, Butler’s and Bakhtin’s ideas provide a rich source of material for radical politics.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

There has been no research involving human participants and/or animals. There are no ethical issues associated with informed consent.

ORCID iD

John M. Roberts  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3288-9505>

Note

1. Bakhtin scholars have often pitted Bakhtin's early writings on ethics and I-Other relations with his later and what is considered to be more critical and sociological work on discourse, language, power and the carnivalesque (see, for instance, [Hirschkop 1999](#)). It is more fruitful to analyse Bakhtin's work through different theoretical themes throughout his work as a whole.

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