
Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 211 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-5381-5

Reviewed by **Aureliana Natale**

You say “I” and you are proud of this word. But greater than this ... is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say “I” but performs “I”.
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

Since their beginning, Performance Studies have considered social life as an appropriate field of application. Richard Schechner, in his seminal essay, *Performance Theory*, for example, establishes the performative nature of social phenomena including them in a continuum which spans from the most aestheticized forms of ritual to the experiences of everyday life.

Performance is an inclusive term. Theater is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotions, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theater, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude.¹

¹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), xvii.

² Victor Turner, *Dal rito al teatro* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 44.

Thus Schechner is able to assemble, under the same ‘performative’ umbrella, creative as well as macro social phenomena as far and different as the Greek tragedy, on the one hand, and globalization and international terrorism on the other. In particular, adopting Victor Turner’s perspective on “social drama”² as a cultural performance based on a sequence of social interactions of agonistic, conflicting or competitive type, Performance Studies, in their interplay with cultural theory, have increasingly started to address questions and matters pertaining to the formation and defence of identity in socially conflictual contexts.

The recent work by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, enters this theoretical arena elaborating on the nexus between social conflict and the process of identity construction. The book originates in a series of meetings and epistolary exchanges in which the two intellectuals reflect together, from a poststructuralist point of view, upon resistance and performativity as a form of political struggle. The book’s structure presents every chapter characterized by an open-ended interaction between the two feminist scholars, each questioning, answering, contributing with her own personal perspective to interrogate matters of gender, power strategies and the relation between the “I” and his/her social environment. Starting from this premise, Butler and Athanasiou proceed in theorizing performativity not just as a way of shaping identities, but also as a way to reclaim them.

If Butler in the 90’s with *Gender Trouble* had opened the debate about identity, conceiving of gender as something not naturally given but culturally constructed, and focusing upon its performative possibilities, after fourteen years, in 2004, she

concentrated in *Precarious Life*, on the complex interaction of social and political factors in the contexts of identity formation and definition:

The “I” who cannot come into being without a “you” is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the “I” nor with the “you”. What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the “I” is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism; doubtless it seems better at that point to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one’s being and becoming.³

³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 45.

Thanks to the dialogue with Athena Athanasiou, in 2013 there is a new direction of enquiry: the “I” taken into account is not only the result of hetero-normative introjections or other culturally induced constrictions, but the specific effect produced upon identity by the neo-liberal turn in globalized economy.

The ‘I’ interrogated in this new situation is the ‘dispossessed’. The thinkers take into consideration a dispossession involving citizenship and civil rights, but also the very possibility to claim survival for one’s body. After having posited land and property ownership at the heart of the onto-epistemology of subject configuration in the West, Butler and Athanasiou also clarify that:

The definition of the ownership of one’s body as property is also a founding moment of liberalism. However certain bodies – paradigmatically the bodies of slaves – are excluded from this classic definition of the biopolitical, which forges a constitutive connection between life, ownership and liberty.⁴

⁴ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, eds., *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 12-13.

Today in the political agenda of neo-liberal globalized capitalism, being and having are still constituted as ontologically imbricated with one another; being is more than ever defined as having: “having is constructed as an essential prerequisite of the proper human being” (13). And still there are today dispossessed human beings, subjected as they are to modern forms of slavery, who are not even able to call their body as their own.

In general, the number of people increasingly expelled from the founding binary having-being is growing up due to the economical crisis; besides, the conflicts that are plaguing countries and communities, as in the case of Egypt or Libya, adding to the huge flood of worldwide migrations, are visibly widening the gap between those who have, and those who hardly are. Athanasiou affirms:

... neoliberal governmentality of the present moment invests – politically, psychically, and economically – in the production and management of forms of life: it “makes live” in inculcating modes on one’s fashioning of one’s “own” life, while shattering and economically depleting certain livelihoods, foreclosing them, rendering them disposable and perishable. (31)

Athanasiou and Butler’s considerations are not just speculative or limited to theorization, but follow contemporary events that are changing the world concretely. Taking into account the new forms of protest, such as the anti-neoliberal street meetings at Puerta del Sol, Zucchotti Park, Syntagma Square, or the gatherings of

the Arab Spring, the two intellectuals ask themselves if it is possible to rethink the liberal biopolitical construction, facing and dismantling the dichotomy having-being and calling upon the body as a category of presence as resistance.

... bodies enact a message, performatively, even when they sleep in public, even when they organize collective methods for cleaning the grounds and occupy, as happened in Tahrir Square and on Wall Street. If there is a crowd, there is also a media event that forms across time and space, calling for the demonstrations, so some set of global connections is being articulated And some set of values is being enacted in the form of a collective precarity and persistence in the making of equality and the many-voiced and unvoiced ways of refusing to become disposable.⁵

⁵ Ibid., 197.

The body as a site of resistance is a central issue both in Butler and in Athanasiou, from their early works, and in *Dispossession* it is a concept at the base of the possibility to disrupt: “contemporary liberal power, in all its repressive, subjugating, brutal, and thanatopolitical force of profit extraction” (30). Taking their cue from Arendt’s concept of thinking the community, the *polis*, as a “space of appearance” (194), the idea of using performativity to regain a place in society turns the political performance in an act of claiming presence on the world’s stage. The dynamic of performance reveals the limits of the norms and discloses its mechanism of injustice through describing it. To gain back a space, after being dispossessed, means to obtain the freedom to be without being subjected to ownership. In other words, Butler and Athanasiou try to “think about dispossession outside the logic of possession” (7), questioning the forces that lead to various forms of dispossession (war, migration, unemployment) and resisting the temptation to rely on the neo-liberal discourse of property and ownership as the crucial individuating features of subjectivity.

These reflections prove valuable if applied, for example, to some extreme forms of performative protest also here in Italy, when the immigrants in the CIE (Centre for Identification and Expulsion) in Rome stitched up their mouths to remonstrate against bureaucratic passive violence. The very act of suturing their mouth signified their only possibility to ask for recognition and civil rights resorting to their last possession, the body, by means of physically hurting it. The same CIE in Rome has also been the scene of an attempted suicide by a woman separated from her husband at their arrival in Ponte Galeria. The story of the Tunisian couple, fugitive from fundamentalist Salaphite families, has been immediately reinterpreted as the *re-mise-en-scène* of the tragic epilogue of Shakespearean ill-fated lovers, Romeo and Juliet. Luckier than their theatrical alter-egos, because the attempted suicide of ‘Juliet’ has been discovered in time, their extreme act has moved public opinion. Romeo and Juliet’s vicissitude in Ponte Galeria has shown how political protest could assume the language of theatre and performance and take advantage of it as a practice of resistance, even exercising violence against one’s body, to gain audience, answers, recognition. As Butler maintains, the possibility to resist the imposed and fixed normativity is inscribed in the body of the subject who can be led to physically perform, even through self-denial, his/her desire of self-affirmation.