Subject, Psyche and Agency : The Work of Judith Butler

Lois McNay

Theory Culture Society 1999 16: 175
DOI: 10.1177/02632769922050467

Subject, Psyche and Agency
The Work of Judith Butler

Lois McNay

Introduction

THERE ARE perhaps three predominant theoretical trends in feminist thought on gender and sexuality: post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, theories of intersubjective communication derived from Habermas and post-Foucauldian theories of discursive construction. Within the Foucauldian tradition, it is the work of Judith Butler on the performative construction of gender that has had the most influential impact upon feminist understandings of gender identity, furthermore her work has also done much to bridge the over-polemicized gap between the psychoanalytic and constructivist perspectives.

In this article I consider two themes in Butler's work: the dialectic of subject formation, namely that the autonomous subject is instituted through constraint, and the question of the relation between the psyche and the social. Both these themes are given considerable attention in Butler's two recent works, *Excitable Speech* (1997a) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997b) which are the focus of this article. I argue that, perhaps more than any other feminist theorist, she has systematically elaborated a way of understanding gender identity as deeply entrenched but not immutable and has thereby pushed feminist theory beyond the polarities of the essentialist debate. At the same time, her thought has also dislodged attendant antitheses, notably those of determinism versus voluntarism and psyche versus the social. With regard to the former, the introduction of a notion of historicity into a conception of the symbolic yields a concept of agency that does much to unpack Foucault's rather elliptical remarks on how power breeds its own resistance. With regard to the second opposition, Butler manages to introduce the destabilizing force of the category of the

■ *Theory, Culture & Society* 1999 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 16(2): 175–193
[0263-2764(199904)16:2;175–193;008764]

unconscious into the functionalist accounts of identity in which a constructivist perspective often results. However, by reconfiguring the psyche as an effect of the interiorization of social norms, she also manages to avoid the tendency towards ahistoricism that hampers psychoanalysis in order to maintain a sense of the social specificity of modalities of desire and gender.

It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which Butler's compelling reformulation of these theoretical impasses has succeeded in pushing feminist thought on gender identity on to new conceptual terrain. Nonetheless, I also draw attention to certain limitations with the theory of the performative which loosely revolve around placing what is an overwhelmingly symbolic account of identity formation in the context of the social and political relations that traverse it. I argue that the concept of agency that underlies Butler's notion of a politics of the performative remains abstract and lacking in social specificity. The idea of the performative provides a compelling account of the open temporality of structure that permits the emergence of autonomous action, but it does not really consider how this symbolic indeterminacy relates to other social structures and how it may catalyse or hinder change. There is no doubt that Butler's sociocentric reworking of the interconnection between psyche and social provides a nuanced account of gender identity, but it tends to result in a negative model of action as the displacement of constraining social norms. It is also important for a conception of agency to include an account of the creative dimensions of action where actors actively appropriate conflicting sociocultural values to institute new collective forms of identity. An understanding of the creative dimensions of action is important for an analysis of how a performative politics, based on the reshaping of gender and sexuality, is to transcend the private sphere in order to have a transformatory impact on collective values and identity norms.

The points to which I draw attention are often implied in Butler's account of the performative but not fully developed. My criticisms, therefore, are intended to be complementary to her thought and hopefully to continue thinking through, from a social theoretical perspective, the issues of stability and change within gender identity which her stimulating and bold thought has done so much to initiate.

Agency and the Performative

Butler's notion of the performative represents an attempt to get beyond an understanding of gender identity as a one-sided process of imposition or determination, without lapsing into a voluntarist model of the subject. Rather than thinking of gender as a quasi-permanent structure, it should be thought of as the *temporalized regulation* of socio-symbolic norms and practices where the idea of the performative expresses both the cultural arbitrariness or 'performed' nature of gender identity and also its deep inculcation in that every performance serves to reinscribe it upon the body. Performativity does not refer to a voluntarist process of performance so much as a 'forced reiteration of norms' in the sense of a compulsory and

constraining heterosexuality that impels and sustains gender identity (Butler, 1993: 94). Although constraint is the condition of possibility of sexuality, this does not mean that the cultural imperative of heterosexual norms is inexorable. Change arises from the constitutive instability of the symbolic and discursive structures which invest the body with meaning. The cultural necessity for a performative reiteration of these symbolic norms highlights the extent to which they are not natural or inevitable and are, therefore, potentially open to change.

By emphasizing the historicity of structure, the concept of the performative highlights how constraint is constitutive but not fully determining of gender subjectivity, in other words, a theory of agency is outlined. Central to the idea of performative agency is an understanding of temporality not as a series of discrete, punctuated moments, but rather as a process of *materialization* in which the constraints of social structures are reproduced and partially transcended in the practices of agents: 'construction ... is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration (1993: 10). Embodied gender identity, then, has a similar 'double historicity' (Bourdieu, 1992: 139). It is a sedimented effect of reiterative or ritualized practices; the repeated inscription of the symbolic norms of heterosexuality upon the body and the living through of those norms permits the emergence of a stable bodily ego (Butler, 1993: 14). The performative construction of gender identity is simultaneously constitutive of agency in that the identificatory processes through which norms are materialized enable the formation of a subject who is capable of resisting those norms. This process of resistance takes place at the boundaries of the corporeal norm, in the domains of 'excluded and delegitimated' sex (1993: 16). The partial and conflictual identifications made by those who are excluded from a heterosexual regime can result in a destabilizing process of *resignification* in which symbolic norms are subversively used to articulate homosexual identities evident, for example, in queer practices.

Butler's account of agency relies on Foucault's idea of 'subjectivation' which denotes the dialectical aspect of identity formation, that 'the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty' (Foucault, 1988: 50). Despite this insight, Butler, along with others, notes that Foucault himself does not elaborate sufficiently on the specific mechanisms whereby the subject may be formed in submission but is not reducible to it (Butler, 1997b: 2). Indeed, it could be argued that, despite the dialectical idea of subjectivation, Foucault does not succeed in integrating systematically the two moments of submission and autonomy and this is illustrated in the oscillation of his thought between the determinism of the work on discipline and the voluntarism of the final work on ethics of the self (McNay, 1999). Butler's work represents a sustained attempt to overcome this aporia and its success is evident in the huge influence it has had on other areas of study. Yet, there is a sense in which the idea of the performative appears to replicate a

weakness of Foucault's model, namely, that it provides an etiolated and rather formal account of agency which lacks a hermeneutic dimension; it is, as Fraser puts it 'deeply antihumanist' (Fraser, 1995: 67).[1] Butler's explanation of the indeterminacy of the symbolic process of materialization provides an abstract account of the structural conditions that give rise to agency, but it lacks a description of how the performative aspects of gender identity are lived by individuals in relation to the web of social practices in which they are enmeshed. In short, insofar as it appears to be primarily a capacity of symbolic structures rather than of individuals, Butler's idea of agency lacks social and historical specificity.[2]

An implication of this abstract account of subject formation is that an analysis of the political dimensions of agency – the capacity of individuals to engender change within the socio-cultural order – is not fully explored. On the whole, there is a tendency in Butler's work to confine discussion of the politics of the performative to a series of dualisms – signification versus resignification, norm versus abjection – which are far from adequate in capturing the complex dynamics of social change and how this impacts on identity formation. Thinkers including Selya Benhabib and Nancy Fraser have accused Butler of reducing gender politics to the relatively narrow arena of issues associated with the linguistic representation of sexuality (e.g. Benhabib, 1995; Fraser, 1995). In the next section, however, I examine how, in her most recent work, Butler takes on this problem of the conflation of the political with the symbolic through a re-elaboration of the notion of the performative in terms of speech-act theory. By demonstrating the mutual inherence but irreducibility of the realms of speech and conduct to each other, Butler offers a more precise formulation of her conception of the political efficacity of the performative and how it relates to institutionalized forms of political intervention.

Excitable Speech

Excitable Speech addresses the problem of the lack of socio-historical specificity in the idea of the performative by insisting on the importance of the distinction between the symbolic and practice – 'speech and conduct' – in order not to conflate the existence of hegemonic norms with the ways in which they may be taken up and modified in the practices of social actors. *Excitable Speech* offers a dazzling reworking of the notion of the performative in terms of speech-act theory and is based around the central thesis that speech is always, to some degree, out of control rendering it susceptible to processes of unauthorized appropriation and, hence, resignification. Recognition of this instability – the *excitability* of discourse – frees speech from the all-encompassing intentionality of the putative sovereign subject. A space is thereby opened for an alternative conception of agency in terms of a counter-discourse that acknowledges its emergence from and dependency upon structures of constraint: 'agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts ... acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as

an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset' (1997a: 16).

This concept of agency underscores the indeterminacy inherent in even the most violent and oppressive forms of discourse or hate speech and is sustained through the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary performatives. The former are speech acts that enact what they are saying in the moment of saying whereas, in the latter, certain effects follow from, rather than being synchronous with the act of speech. Following Derrida's critique of Austin, Butler demonstrates the incoherence of understanding the illocutionary act as that which executes its deed at the moment of utterance by arguing that its performative power relies on forms of ceremonial, ritual and convention whose necessarily prior status undoes the idea of the single, self-contained moment of performance. The instantaneity of effect is undone by the existence of structures that pre-date and outlast the performative: 'The "moment" in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance' (1997a: 3). In Butler's view, Austin's understanding of illocutionary force rests on an untenable conflation of utterance with effect or speech with conduct. Although it has corporeal effects, the injury of speech cannot be as immediate as that of physical assault, rather it operates through a process of temporal deferral where its repeated effects bring into being or materialize derogated subject positions. Interpellation of the subject is not an instantaneous act of subjection, but involves a process of cultural reiteration which engenders a somatic circuit of recognition. The process of temporal deferral where the original conditions of utterance cannot be indefinitely sustained points also to the possibility of the intentionality of the utterance going awry and producing unintended effects of subversion and counter-discourse. The open temporality of speech results in a dissemination of effects beyond the control of the speaking subject that may result in the possibility of resignification, or the subject's 'linguistic survival as well as, potentially, that subject's linguistic death' (1997a: 28).

Butler's work on the radical historicity of symbolic structures has important implications for feminist theory. To briefly note one; it suggests a revised formulation of the relation between symbolic, ideological and individual narratives of identity in terms other than those of dissimulation and misrecognition. The main problem with construing the symbolic construction of gender identity as the imposition of a patriarchal ideology, for example, is that the discontinuous nature and effects of representations of femininity are disregarded producing a coherent, unified feminine subject as a substrate of subordination (Adams, 1990: 107). The idea of the instability of speech, which renders it open to reappropriation, replaces simplified notions of misidentification with a more complex model of positionality with regard to conventional gender norms, suggested, for example, in Holloway's notion of investment (Holloway, 1984). Ideological images may momentarily stabilize meanings allowing individuals to identify

with or against persons or situations. This is suggested in Winship's work on young women's magazines which, she claims, articulate visual codes of femininity in such a way as to offer readers a more assertive and confident sense of independent femininity (Winship, 1985). The expression of identity, no matter how marginal, cannot take place in isolation from dominant norms and pre-given ideological forms. For a narrative to be meaningful and to acquire a degree of social authority, it must draw to some extent on culturally dominant discourses of truth-telling and this involves inevitably a process of autonomization where a given narrative transcends relevance to its initial situation (e.g. Gilmore, 1994: 23–4).

Although it suggests a dialogical account of the subject's location with regard to dominant norms, it may appear that, rather than moving towards a more distinct understanding of political agency, the idea of the perlocutionary performative entrenches itself deeper within a primarily linguistic account of identity formation. Butler goes on, however, to draw out brilliantly some of the problematic political implications that a closing of the gap between speech and its effects has upon the political analysis of 'hate speech'. Catherine MacKinnon, for example, understands the effects of pornography in terms of the illocutionary performative, that is, that hate speech constitutes its addressee at the moment of utterance. Pornography does not reinforce patriarchal structures, it constructs women's social reality in the form of a visual imperative which compels a compliance with its demand: 'the image says, "do this", where the commanded act is an act of sexual subordination, and where, in the doing of that act, the social reality of woman is constructed precisely as the position of the sexually subordinate' (Butler, 1997a: 67). The problem with such an analysis is that it positions the objects of pornographic representation so unambiguously in the position of victim that it denies the agency of the oppressed. This is evident in MacKinnon's categorical refusal to recognize that lesbian and gay pornography does not simply replicate structures of victimization, but, in fact, has emancipatory implications for those whose sexuality is denied public expression. Furthermore, this collapsing of speech with its effects justifies strategies of state intervention, such as censorship, on behalf of those who are presumed to be unable to act for themselves. As Foucault has recognized, the intensification of juridical control in areas such as sexuality is used often against the very social movements and marginal groups it is meant to protect.

The insistence on the gap between speech and conduct, then, does not represent a retreat by Butler into abstruse linguistic theory, but rather broadens an understanding of political agency beyond institutional and juridical action, giving support to 'ways of restaging and resignifying speech in contexts that exceed those determined by the courts' (1997a: 23). In the next section, however, I argue that the relation between resignificatory practices and other social structures remains unexplored and, thus, the distinction between speech and conduct becomes blurred again. The symbolic comes to metonymically represent other social and political relations

and Butler's idea of political agency remains, therefore, an abstract potentiality rather than the result of specific social practices.

Speech and Effect

Although an emphasis on the temporal gap between speech and conduct is central to Butler's notion of a subversive reworking of dominant forms, there is a sense in which the distinction is not maintained insofar as the primarily symbolic notion of resignification comes to replace a more sociocentric conception of agency. There remains a tendency to valorize the linguistic act of resignification per se as inherently subversive at the expense of a more sustained consideration of the extent to which attendant social relations are dislodged or reinforced by such an act (Fraser, 1995: 67–8). In other words, political agency is understood as a generalized potentiality connected to the distantiation of speech from its original conditions of utterance and not as a more variable phenomenon whose effects, subversive or otherwise, are contingent on a particular configuration of economic and social relations. This is not to deny the important political implications of the examples of resignification given by Butler, for example, in her discussion of the military's treatment of homosexuals. Nor is it to insist on a rigid division between socio-political practices and symbolic forms. Claude Lefort, for example, has demonstrated how the indeterminacy of hegemonic norms and values has important political effects in that it renders democratic systems open to contestation (Lefort, 1986; McNay, 1998). The primacy Butler's model accords to the process of symbolic identification results, however, in a disregard of the specificity of socio-political power relations and of the connections between the two spheres.

The extent to which Butler prioritizes the symbolic over the socio-political is evident in her discussion of Bourdieu's work in the final chapter of *Excitable Speech*. The engagement with his thought is, in certain respects, overdue; Butler's thematization of the performative through the ideas of temporality and reiteration bear close resemblance to Bourdieu's understanding of the interiorization of symbolic violence through the concepts of habitus and practice (McNay, 1999). Despite these affinities, Butler is critical of Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence in that it ties the speech act too closely to its institutional context and misses the processes of temporal deferral and dissemination that are constitutive of the indeterminacy of the performative and of the potential for misappropriation. In this regard, Butler's remarks echo those of commentators who claim that Bourdieu's theory is so skewed towards explaining social reproduction that it is unable to offer an account of change or disruption within the social structure (e.g. Alexander, 1994). A similar lack of indeterminacy hampers Bourdieu's notion of habitus which, by stressing the extent to which there is an accommodation between dominant power relations and bodily dispositions, misses the extent to which the process of corporeal inculcation is never straightforward or complete. There is a residue, or bodily volatility, that renders strategies of domination vulnerable to displacement: 'This

excess is what Bourdieu's account appears to miss or, perhaps, to suppress: the abiding incongruity of the speaking body, the way in which it exceeds its interpellation, and remains uncontained by any of its acts of speech' (Butler, 1997a: 155). By producing an account of power that is structurally committed to the status quo, Bourdieu forecloses the possibility of agency emerging from the margins. In contrast, the performative compels simultaneously institutionalized forms of recognition and a critical perspective on existing institutions exemplified in calls for justice or democracy on the part of those who have been radically disenfranchized.

Butler is undoubtedly right to draw attention to Bourdieu's tendency to overestimate the accommodation between dominant symbolic codes and corporeal hexis evident, for example, in his essay on gender domination (Bourdieu, 1990). However, there is also an increasing emphasis in his recent work on the potentiality for resistance arising in a fashion similar to Butler's idea of resignification where the opportunities for subversive misappropriation increase with the lengthening of circuits of legitimation in late capitalism (e.g. Bourdieu, 1996: 387). Fundamentally, Butler and Bourdieu do not disagree over understanding the conditions of emergence for subversive behaviour, rather they dispute the conceptualization of the relation between symbolic forms and social context. Bourdieu does not deny the heterodox force of performative resignifications, however, he emphasizes that these are situated within a particular 'field' of power relations which, in turn, is understood in terms of its overarching connections with other fields in the social totality. Butler's assertion that Bourdieu rehabilitates the base/superstructure distinction in order to reduce the symbolic to an epiphenomenon of the social fails to appreciate the refractory force of the concept of the field (Butler, 1997a: 157). The idea of the field enables Bourdieu to produce a differentiated and dynamic model of power relations where each field has its own historicity and logic which may reinforce or conflict with those of other fields. This view, where symbolic power is examined in terms of its connection to other power relations, does not rob symbolic power of its autonomy, or conflate speech with effects. It does, however, produce a more nuanced, and possibly more sceptical, assessment of the changes that can be wrought through resignificatory practices. Bourdieu is critical of the dichotomous logic of domination–resistance which tends to simplify the complex nature of freedom and constraint in capitalist society and suggests instead the term 'regulated liberties' to denote a more complex relation between the dominant and its subjects (Bourdieu, 1991: 102).

A weakness of Butler's primarily symbolic concept of power is that it underestimates the extent to which there can be a systemic recuperation of seemingly radical practices. The emancipatory effects of the emergence of a given subaltern identity have to be considered in the context of the structures of consumerism that have played a part in its creation and which render it susceptible to 'commodification, recuperation, and depoliticization' (Fraser, 1995: 163). The problem with the concept of resignification, and associated terms such as abjection, is that its status as a

symbolic mechanism is not sufficient to analyse the 'overdetermined entanglements of discursive and non-discursive social arrangements', of symbolic, political and economic power relations that give rise to the emergence of new identities (Hennessey, 1993: 86). There is no doubt, for example, that the resignification of the term 'queer' has been a powerful catalyst in the emergence of a set of gay identities, however, these transformations are also predicated on a complex set of socio-economic changes associated, on the most general level, with the detraditionalization of social relations in late capitalism. It is not just a case of the resignification of dominant terms by marginal or abject groups because, in a sense, the ability of these groups to collectively institute new forms of identity suggests that their social location is not unambiguously marginal. As historians such as D'Emilio have shown, the emergence of a metropolitan gay identity is predicated on a convergence of social and symbolic relations which tend towards the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of homosexual groups (D'Emilio, 1984). The economic centrality of the gay consumer – the 'pink pound' – has facilitated the greater visibility of a marginalized sexuality in a way that the notion of resignification does not really capture. This is not to deny the force of Butler's notion of the performative, but it does suggest that an analysis of the transformatory effects of resignification upon entrenched norms requires a contextualization within wider socio-economic relations and an understanding of agency not just as a structural potentiality but as a set of embedded practices.

Psyche and Subject

The second area in which Butler's work on the performative has made a significant contribution is in overcoming the impasse between psychoanalytic and constructivist theories of subject formation. This debate is sufficiently well known to warrant only brief recapitulation. The encounter between the psychoanalytic and constructivist accounts of gender was caught up in the debate over essentialism, focusing on the extent to which a psychic account of identity formation normalized sexual difference by evacuating it of any historical content. This reification is held to arise from Lacan's emphasis on the lack that forms the condition of possibility and impossibility of all speaking subjects, compounded for women by the inevitable assumption of a feminine identity defined in relation to a phallocentric system of signification.[3] Woman's entry into the symbolic is defined in terms of a double negativity or 'masquerade' in which the imposition of patriarchal dominance appears to be an inescapable cost of identity constitution. It is unclear how any position outside of the phallocentric matrix could be maintained, in other words, power is always already patriarchal. Although Lacan states that the symbolic is socially and historically variable, rather than an abstract system of signification, his primarily structural account of sexual differentiation tends towards a form of aculturalism that obfuscates the variable and changeable nature of systems of power. The failure to consider how social power may be composed of other norms and

relations which may reinforce or conflict with patriarchy, means that Lacanian psychoanalysis provides no way of explaining the variability of sexual identity, either across cultures or in terms of cross-cutting identifications which exceed the binary frame of heterosexuality (Grosz, 1990; Moore, 1994). The extent to which socio-historical variability is negated is evident, for Butler, where homosexual identity is confined to the pre-social domain of the imaginary thus 'preserving the heterosexism of culture through relegating homosexuality to the unrealizable life of passing fantasy' (1993: 111).

Despite reservations about the extent to which the Lacanian paradigm produces a dehistoricized understanding of sexuality, Butler recognizes the force of the idea of the unconscious. The concept suggests a more compelling view of the instabilities intrinsic to the process of subject formation than a constructivist perspective whose use of concepts such as normalization and internalization tends to be functionalist, e.g. the Foucauldian account of individuals as docile bodies. Butler frames this difference between the psychoanalytic and constructionist accounts of identity in terms of the distinction between the categories of soul and psyche: 'the psyche, which includes the unconscious, is very different from the subject: the psyche is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity to become a coherent subject' (1997b: 86).

Some psychoanalytic feminist theorists have attempted to overcome this opposition between the concepts of psyche and subject. Countering claims of its ahistorical nature, Jacqueline Rose has argued that the concept of the unconscious – as indicative of an irreducible discontinuity in psychic life – has political relevance for feminism in that it draws attention to the difficulty that women have in assuming socially defined feminine roles (Rose, 1986: 91). Also rebutting accusations of ahistoricism, Teresa Brennan argues that psychical structures do not exist in isolation and the force with which they manifest themselves at any given time is determined by the social-historical context (Brennan, 1990). There exists a relation of non-exhaustive mutual determination where the content of the psyche is not simply a repository for social determinations, nor, however, do psychical structures have an overriding influence within the social: the psychic exists in an 'as yet to be determined extent' within social relations. This discontinuous relation is manifested in the structure of fantasy which, insofar as it involves the representation of a primordial absence, is linked to a universal structure of desire – a 'foundational' but not ahistorical fantasy (Brennan, 1993: 22). Fantasies necessarily draw upon the social-historical for their specific content, and yet the immanence of the social-historical within the content of fantasy can not be established in any straightforward fashion. The effects of fantasy are not contained within the private sphere of the individual psyche but influence interaction with others in that they are constantly propelled into the social realm. In this way, psychic reality may be sustained, intensified or contradicted by its material context. Thus, as Brennan questions, would the fantasy of woman (as virgin-whore) persist or would it

fade into a 'pale myth' if it were not tied to concrete relations which disempower women, which literally 'passify' them.[4]

While conceding the force of the psychoanalytic account of the instability of identity, Butler retains doubts about the extent to which a primarily psychic account of resistance to what Castoriadis has called 'identarian logic' evacuates the social realm of any specificity. The psychic might well be the source of resistance to normalization, but it has little explanatory force in terms of the status and efficacy of this resistance. For Butler, there are difficulties with the way in which psychoanalytic theorists construe the unconscious or the Real (e.g. Žižek) as the invariant source of trauma or point of non-closure for any ideological or symbolic system. Such concepts denote the contingency of any social formation in that they constitute a traumatic kernel which prevents its full institution. However, in as much as these concepts represent a self-identical dynamic that emerges in all social formations, then, the specific historicity or contingency of social systems is undercut:

> the notion of a lack taken from psychoanalysis as that which secures the contingency of *any* and *all* social formations is itself a presocial principle universalised at the cost of every consideration of power, sociality, culture, politics, which regulates the relative closure and openness of social practices. (Butler, 1993: 202)

To what extent can this psychic remainder be understood as a negative source of disruption within the dominant or as a more positive force through which new social identities might be created? Furthermore, what happens to the unruly status of the unconscious when there are unconscious attachments to subjection rather than resistances? As Butler puts it: 'To thwart the injunction to produce a docile body is not the same as dismantling the injunction or changing the terms of subject constitution' (1997b: 88). In other words, can the concept of unconscious disruption adequately explain the variable and innovative nature of change within the socio-political realm?

Butler's response to this failure to conceive of historicity in a more substantive sense is to reverse the causal privilege that the psychic is accorded in respect of the social. Although Brennan attempts to draw out the social and political implications of a psychic account of identity, there is still a sense in which the priority accorded to psychic structures forms the parameters of the social rather than vice versa. The primacy invested in the psychic is evident in Brennan's idea of the 'foundational' fantasy. For Butler, it is not so much a case of pre-social psychic structures propelling themselves into the social, but, in a Foucauldian fashion, it is the introjection of historically variable symbolic norms that is formative of the psyche. Unlike Foucault, however, who underestimates the indeterminacy of the mechanisms of internalization, Butler argues that the internalization of norms is an uneven process whose dynamic is shaped by prevailing social

and historical relations. It is this socially determined process of internalization which is constitutive of the split between psychic and social power (1997b: 19). At the same time, the dynamic temporality of the process of internalization means that the psyche is not reducible to the social: 'Just as the subject is derived from conditions of power that precede it, so the psychic operation of the norm is derived, though not mechanically or predictably, from prior social operations' (1997b: 21). Power turns back upon itself producing the domain of the psychic which inheres within the social – evident in the way in which psychic phenomena circumscribe the domain of liveable sociality – but which is never prior to the social and is always vulnerable to historical change.

The force of Butler's sociocentric concept of the psyche is the extent to which it can explain the non-correspondence between hegemonic gender norms and sexuality in terms other than pre-social imaginary identifications which leave the symbolic intact as an immutable law. Thus, for Butler, all forms of symbolic identification – heterosexual and homosexual – are achieved only at the cost of a certain foreclosure or *melancholia*, understood as a refused process of grieving. The relinquishment of the object of desire necessary to the formation of gender identity involves a loss which is never fully avowed by being melancholically incorporated into the ego. Thus, heterosexual identity is based on the abandonment of homosexual attachments which, because they cannot be grieved for, are preserved in the psyche as repudiated identifications. Conversely, rigid forms of homosexual identity can sometimes be based on a rejection of heterosexuality that is to some degree an identification with it, for example, the gay drag queen could be seen as an allegorization of an unavowed loss of the feminine object of desire. For Butler, it is important that this idea of melancholia be understood not as a psychic economy, but as part of the operations of regulatory social power which are contingently organized through certain kinds of foreclosure. Thus, to give expression to that grief is to acknowledge a loss which is denied, and to voice an anger which can result in political acts of resistance, for example the Names Project Quilt commemorating those who have died of AIDS (1997b: 148). In this way, Butler's notion of the performative provides a way of investing psychic terms with a political force without losing sight, as social constructionism often does, of the indeterminacy of subject forms.

By locating socialization in the system of signification that far exceeds the meta-cultural dynamic of Oedipus, Butler offers an explanation of how social roles may be historically variable and culturally specific. The necessarily social-historical character of language permits the creation of the new in and through language – an impossibility if language were a completely determined code or the symbolic an apparently incontestable order. Indeed, this aspect of language as a magma of infinite significations and referrals is the condition of possibility of any identity fixation since it can only emerge as such against the background of instability and non-identity. It is by positing the essential instability of historical significations that Butler's

thought discloses the potential to disrupt and challenge patriarchal systems of meaning. At the same time, however, the instability and variation within gender identity is not construed as pure contingency. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, this is a weakness of certain types of poststructural thought which overemphasize the open-endedness of identity at the expense of a consideration of its overdetermination, that 'some stories have a much longer structuration, a *longue durée*, almost an historical inertia' (Hall, 1997: 32). Thus, Butler limits the contingency of the social by showing how its inherence within psychic constraints can lead to an attachment to subjection and to an unwillingness to acknowledge the possibility of change. In this way, Butler's original reworking of the relation between the psychic and the social bypasses the dichotomy of fixity and contingency that hampers debates on identity and pushes a feminist understanding of gender identity on to a new terrain.

Agency and Creativity

Although Butler's reformulation of the relation between psyche and social represents an important development in the feminist understanding of gender identity, there is a sense in which, by focusing on that relation, the concept of agency remains a predominantly negative one. The subject's relation to the socio-symbolic is conceived, by and large, in terms of negativity or constraint which, as we have seen, results in a tendency to valorize the act of resignification per se. This primarily negative account of agency as displacement fails to draw out fully, however, the ways in which the symbolic realm is composed of conflicting values and resources which may be actively, and sometimes creatively, appropriated by actors to institute new value systems and new forms of collective identity. The construal of the socio-symbolic order as a uniform realm of constraint disregards the innovative and dynamic nature of action by confining it to the relatively narrow idea of resistance. Furthermore, by locating the source of change in the permanent disjunction between the psyche and social, Butler's model runs the risk of dehistoricizing the idea of performative agency. Insofar as she fails to develop a more active or positive account of agency, Butler could be said to be vulnerable to her own criticism of the concept of the unconscious: resignification becomes a self-identical principle which forecloses an analysis of the variable nature of social action and change. Arising from the negative formulation of agency as displacement is a second difficulty, namely that the performative results in a primarily individualistic notion of political practice where important questions are left unaddressed, such as the nature of the relation between the private and the public and how a primarily sexualized politics can have an effect on wider collective values. I will finish by expanding briefly on these two points.

The creativity of action is a recurrent if somewhat submerged theme in the work of continental social theorists and philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Cornelius Castoriadis, Michel de Certeau and Alain Touraine. By emphasizing the creative dimensions of action, these authors highlight, in

different ways, how even the most normative forms of behaviour presuppose imaginative elements. In Ricoeur's terms, social reproduction rests upon a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation. From this perspective, for example, Castoriadis argues that Lacanian psychoanalysis has a central weakness in that it cannot conceive of the psyche as radical imagination, that is, as the ability to create the new *ex nihilo*: 'the emergence of representations or as representative flux not subject to determinacy' (Castoriadis, 1987: 274).[5] The extent to which the constitutive role of the imagination is overlooked is evident in Lacan's account of the mirror stage which, in Castoriadis's view, reduces the plenitude of the imaginary to the flatness of the specular structure. The imaginary is illusory to the extent that it conceals or sutures a fundamental lack in the subject which, in the mirror stage, is connected to the anatomical underdevelopment of the infant and which, subsequently, is connected to the impossibility of acquiring stable identity within the symbolic realm. Castoriadis criticizes this notion of the imaginary because its specular logic is unable to explain why it is that the infant is first impelled to identify, invest and recognize itself in the mirror. In other words, prior to the specular moment of reflection, the mirror itself must be invested with desire:

> The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the 'mirror' itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation *ex nihilo*. (Castoriadis, 1987: 3)

The anterior investment of the mirror signals the work of the radical imaginary which is able to invest, create and represent *ex nihilo*, it is an originary capacity of figuration.

Castoriadis's concept of the radical imagination is not without its difficulties, particularly with regard to his occasional insistence on the radical heterogeneity that exists between psyche and society (Whitebook, 1996). However, of interest is the way in which he extends the idea of radical imagination to the concept of the social imaginary in order to explain the self-production of society in terms of innovation and the capacity to create new socio-symbolic forms. An understanding of the creative dimensions of action or agency need not necessarily denote a celebratory populism, evident in types of cultural studies or feminist standpoint theory (McNay, 1996: 66). Action is not purely creative, even the most obviously innovative practice presupposes an incorporation of the tendencies of the social world in the form of routine and pre-reflexive forms of behaviour suggested, for example, in Bourdieu's idea of habitus. Nor, however, is agency purely rational or normatively oriented; as Joas points out: 'action that is appropriate to the situation and conforms to norms cannot simply be deduced from norms themselves, but often requires that the actor devise a new and unfamiliar path of action' (Joas, 1996: 233). Creativity is needed not only in order to realize norms and values in concrete practices; the

existence of values also presupposes a creative process by which values are fashioned and transmitted.[6]

Lacanian psychoanalysis misses this imaginative and active aspect of social action because of the emphasis it places on the repressive inscription of the individual which is a condition of entry into the socio-symbolic order: 'these standpoints fail to accord due recognition to the active dimensions of subjecthood; to the point that ideological and social fields are rewritten and changed within the indeterminacy of subjectivity' (Elliott, 1992: 243). Although Butler attempts to overcome Lacan's predominantly repressive account of the symbolic by reframing it in social terms, she retains an element of its negativity in her notion of agency as primarily a strategy of displacement of constraining symbolic norms, rather than, in more active terms, as an appropriation of cultural resources arising from the broader struggle 'for the social control of historicity' (Touraine, 1977: 31). This model of agency as displacement tends to fetishize the marginal and celebrates, in an unqualified fashion, the notion of non-identity. The spontaneous and fluid politics of the performative is implicitly aligned with the amorphous, rather than being regarded as a product of the shifting power relations between groups of social actors. This is evident in Butler's explanation of gender as melancholia which, although it provides a compelling explanation of the anger or desire that may underlie various forms of social protest, leaves unaddressed the mechanisms through which these psychic reserves are channelled into collective forms of activity. This would necessarily involve looking beyond the interface between psyche and social to consider the dynamics internal to civil society and how these relate to institutional and non-institutional politics. As it stands, the account of agency implied in the performative arises from the non-identity between psyche and social. However, given that this non-identity is the condition of possibility of all identity, it cannot really explain the process of active appropriation that is required to explain certain types of action that result in the emergence of new social forms.

In sum, an important implication of conceptualizing the creative dimensions of action is that it raises the issue of social change at a collective level. That is, the question of how creative or innovative action detaches itself from its original conditions of enactment and may give rise to a set of new values which become resources for further action. Such a notion is suggested in Touraine's work on the self-production of society understood not as a simple act of creation but as a complex process involving value clashes between groups, changes in consciousness, social protests and repression based on force (e.g. Touraine, 1977). It is this collective dimension that is missing from Butler's account of performative resignification whose underpinnings in a theory of psychic dislocation confine its explanatory force to the private realm of individual action. The examples she cites of performative resignification imply a collective dimension, however, because of her unwillingness to stray beyond a primarily linguistic model of identity formation, issues relating to value conflict, how new forms of collective

identity emerge and how they may or may not relate to wider institutional change are foreclosed. Butler's discussion of the affirmative revaluation of the category of woman, for example, doesn't address the extent to which this change might be predicated on some of the complex transformations in women's economic and social status documented, say, by Sylvia Walby in her work on the restructuring of gender relations (Butler, 1997a: 158; Walby, 1997). The notion of the performative is certainly capable of accommodating these questions, but the relation between the psyche and the social needs to be elaborated more fully if the analysis of change within identity formations is not to be confined to an individualistic paradigm. This tendency of the politics of the performative to leave unexamined how symbolic changes may catalyse or hinder change within wider social relations leaves it caught within a public–private dichotomy or what Jonathan Dollimore calls a politics of the bedroom (Dollimore, 1991: 321). In short, while it provides an ontological account of the psychic conditions that permit resistance on an individual level, it fails to explore fully how the active appropriation and reshaping of values and resources by actors may result in changes, at a collective level, to socio-symbolic definitions of identity.

Conclusion

I have argued that Judith Butler's work on the performative construction of the subject has made an important contribution to an understanding of gender identity as durable but not immutable in two respects. First, by expanding on Foucault's remark that the autonomous subject emerges from constraint, Butler has outlined a non-voluntarist conception of agency that breaks out of dualisms of domination and resistance which sometimes hamper feminist thought. Second, Butler's account of the inherence of the psychic in the social, introduces a fuller understanding of the ambiguities of subject formation to a constructivist perspective without losing the emphasis on the social and historical specificity of identity. The criticisms I have raised relate to this issue of historical specificity in that, in various ways, Butler needs to explain in more detail how symbolic norms relate to other social and political structures through which gender identities are also fashioned. These criticisms are not intended as indications of insurmountable flaws in Butler's thought, but rather are intended to be complementary to her project. Indeed, I hope that the method of immanent reading deployed here, of reading with Butler in order to highlight the strengths of her thought, makes this clear and also demonstrates the extent to which her work has sketched out important new areas for feminist debate.

Notes

1. In the light of this criticism, it is somewhat ironic that the idea of the performative has been criticized for being too voluntarist, a charge that Butler has convincingly refuted (Butler, 1994: 33).

2. Butler herself acknowledges this in a recent article in *New Left Review* (Butler, 1998).

3. The phallus is a symbolic, not a literal term, it is that to which value accrues. Yet anatomical differences come to acquire significance insofar as the actual penis comes to figure in the representation of lack marking symbolic castration. The penis of the little boy lends itself to an approximation to or symbolization of the phallus. The problem, however, is that the penis is not the phallus and, therefore, the boy struggles to have the phallus. The little girl, however, does not possess the penis which means that she has no means to represent her lack. Thus, while both the position of the boy and girl to the phallus is problematic, the girl's position is more problematic because it is assigned a negative relation to the phallus (see Grosz, 1990).

4. Brennan illustrates this discontinuity using the work of Sarah Koffman who shows how the complaint amongst Freud's female patients that their mothers did not give them enough milk did not actually correspond to reality. Rather it involved the projection of feelings of frustration arising from the structurally inaccessible nature of desire on to the finite, external figure of the mother/wet-nurse. Whilst demonstrating that there is no one-to-one correspondence between fantasy and reality, Brennan argues that Koffman's work also illustrates that fantasies inevitably involve a process of projection into social reality: 'psychoanalysis is a theory of the derivation of certain fantasies and (inescapably) a theory of how fantasies go *out*, over there. Into the social, onto people and things who are thereby credited or confused with, or constructed by imaginary attributes' (Brennan, 1990: 131).

5. Freudian psychoanalysis partially recognizes the psyche as radical imagination or as the capacity to make representations *ex nihilo*. Although it accords a central role to dreams, fantasy, etc., it fails to fully take account of the constitutive nature of the radical imagination in the formation of the psyche. Understood as a process of originary phantasmatization, the radical imagination pre-exists and presides over every organization of the drives even the most primitive ones (Castoriadis, 1987: 286–7).

6. My remarks in this article on the implications of the thought of Castoriadis, Bourdieu and Ricoeur for feminist theory are developed in more detail in my forthcoming *Gender Reconfigured.*

References

Adams, Parveen (1990) 'A Note on the Distinction between Sexual Division and Sexual Differences', in P. Adams and E. Cowie (eds) *The Woman in Question.* London: Verso.

Alexander, Jeremy (1994) *Fine de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction and the Problem of Reason.* London: Verso.

Benhabib, Selya (1995) 'Subjectivity, Historiography and Politics', in S. Benhabib et al. (eds) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange.* London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990) 'La Domination masculine', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 84: 2–31.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1996) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brennan, Teresa (1990) 'An Impasse in Psychoanalysis and Feminism', in S. Gunew (ed.) *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Brennan, Teresa (1993) *History after Lacan*. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (1994) 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy* 67: 32–9.

Butler, Judith (1997a) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (1997b) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Butler, Judith (1998) 'Marxism and the Merely Cultural', *New Left Review* 227: 33–44.

Castoriadis, Cornelius (1987) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

D'Emilio, John (1984) 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', in A. Snitow, C. Stansell and S. Thompson (eds) *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. London: Virago.

Dollimore, Jonathan (1991) *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Elliott, Anthony (1992) *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition: Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Foucault, Michel (1988) 'An Aesthetics of Existence' in L. Kritzman (ed.) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*. London: Routledge.

Fraser, Nancy (1995) 'False Antitheses', 'Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn', in S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell and N. Fraser (eds) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. London: Routledge.

Gilmore, Leigh (1994) *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self Representation*. London: Cornell University Press.

Grosz, Elizabeth (1990) *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart (1997) 'Interview on Culture and Power', *Radical Philosophy* 86: 24–41.

Hennessey, Rosemary (1993) *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Feminism*. London: Routledge.

Holloway, Wendy (1984) 'Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity', in J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Benn and V. Walkerdine (eds) *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London: Methuen.

Joas, Hans (1996) *The Creativity of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lefort, Claude (1986) *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

McNay, Lois (1996) 'Michel de Certeau and the Ambivalent Everyday', *Social Semiotics* 6: 61–82.

McNay, Lois (1998) 'Foucault and Agonstic Democracy', in A. Carter and G. Stokes (eds) *Liberal Democracy and its Critics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

McNay, Lois (1999) 'Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity', *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(1): 95–117.

McNay, Lois (forthcoming) *Gender Reconfigured: Feminism and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Moore, Henrietta (1994) *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rose, Jacqueline (1986) *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. London: Verso.

Touraine, Alain (1977) *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walby, Sylvia (1997) *Gender Transformations*. London: Routledge.

Whitebook, Joel (1996) 'Intersubjectivity and the Monadic Core of the Psyche: Habermas and Castoriadis on the Unconscious', in M. Passerin d'Entreves and S. Benhabib (eds) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Winship, Janice (1985) 'A Girl Needs to Get "Street-Wise"', *Feminist Review* 21: 25–46.

Lois McNay is a lecturer in politics and fellow of Somerville College, Oxford. She is the author of *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), *Foucault: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) and *Gender Reconfigured: Feminism and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).