

The Fear of Gender

Butler, Judith. 2024. *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Allen Lane. (308 p)

FEW BOOKS HAVE been the object of such great anticipation as *Who's Afraid of Gender?* has. *Finally*, Judith Butler would return to gender.

Butler's latest book is not a return to their theory of gender (although parts of it do revisit and partly revise some of their early writings on gender). Rather, the book is Butler's effort to make sense of the rise and spread of anti-gender ideology as a global political phenomenon and authoritarian political project. Why, the book asks, is it that gender seems to provoke such intense feelings of fear? To explore this question, Butler proposes that "gender" in anti-gender ideology operates as a phantasm, in that it "absorb[s] wildly different ideas of what threatens the world" (8). As a phantasm, "gender" is made responsible and blamed for legitimate social anxieties about the conditions of livability that stem from the climate crisis, forced migration and violent economic inequality.

Butler takes the notion of phantasm from psychoanalytic theory, influenced specifically by French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. The term designates a psychosocial site "where intimate fears and anxieties become organized to incite political passion" (9). They argue that the forcefulness of the gender-phantasm is its ability to condensate disparate fears of destruction, while at the same time displacing any demand for logical consistency or coherence. Hence, pointing out factual errors or seeking to engage in serious critical discussions have no bearing on the anti-gender ideology. Instead, the fungibility of the gender-phantasm is

a key component of how anti-gender actors seek to manipulate, exploit and incite fear to make violent repression and fascist ideation seem justifiable – a central argument that Butler convincingly makes.

The book is organized around twelve chapters that each chart and reconstruct some of the ideas that constitute anti-gender as an ideological formation, starting with an introduction where Butler articulates their understanding of how anti-gender ideology mobilizes the phantasm of gender. Chapter one “The Global Scene” provides a good overview of some of the key global actors in the anti-gender movement and, importantly, documents how the gender-phantasm operates in the common discursive repertoire that connects these actors and enables the anti-gender ideology to circulate and expand across different geographical and regional contexts. Chapter two “Vatican Views” interrogates the Catholic Church’s and the Vatican’s central role in the anti-gender movement. Chapters three “Contemporary Attacks on Gender in the United States” and four “Trump, Sex, and the Supreme Court” address the characteristics of the anti-gender ideology in the U.S. context, where education and laws on discrimination are rendered as two specific sites purported to have been corrupted by gender. Chapter five “TERFs and British Matters of Sex” examines the inflammatory debate on biological sex and trans lives among gender-critical and trans-exclusionary feminists and feminists insisting that any feminist politics must include trans and genderqueer people in the United Kingdom.

Chapters six “What About Sex?”, seven “What Gender Are You?” and eight “Nature/Culture: Toward Co-Construction” address the conviction among both the anti-gender movement and gender-critical feminists that sex is determined by biological and material reality and that talk of gender as a social construction is a dangerous and totalitarian distortion of that reality. In challenging this argument, Butler argues for an understanding of gender from the perspective of co-construction, which emphasizes how the lived material body always interacts with different social histories and worlds. Chapters nine “Racial and Colonial Legacies of Gender Dimorphism” and ten “Foreign Terms, or the Disturbance of Translation” address the accusation that gender is a form

of colonization being imposed on the Global South. Drawing on the work of decolonial and black feminists, Butler critically discusses how heteronormative gender as an ideal of civilized whiteness was crafted through the violent derealization and degradation of black and brown bodies that mark the histories of colonization and enslavement. In the concluding chapter Butler calls for a transnational coalitional politics including all of those targeted by the anti-gender ideology movement, to form a counter-imaginary that seeks to undermine the fantasy of the destructive powers of gender.

The strength of the book is its pedagogical and sharp analysis of the political and emotive logics that surround the attack on gender, which is aimed at a wider audience than the narrow academic context. In analytically describing the position that the idea of gender occupies in anti-gender ideology as a phantasm – as the source of fear – Butler convincingly illustrates the discursive operation of the anti-gender movement, in that pointing to gender as a “cause” of destruction makes the destruction of gender seem like a necessary and morally justified solution. But a critical point I wish to make is that while Butler provides a theoretical analysis of how the anti-gender movement exploits existing fears and anxieties, as well as its ideological motives for doing so (the wish to restore an illusory past patriarchal order), what remains somewhat undertheorized in the book is *why* people identify with those scenarios of destruction crafted and propelled by anti-gender actors. I agree with Butler that we have to understand the “attractiveness” of anti-gender ideology and other fascist mobilizations in light of how climate disaster, capitalist exploitation and decimation of welfare policies create real fear of destruction in people’s lives and uncertainty of the future. But to understand how those kinds of fears become ripe for exploitation requires more in terms of theorization.

In the concluding chapter, Butler does discuss this aspect when they say that gender “attracts specific anxieties” (256) because it relates to embodiment and sense of self. Hence, in times of uncertainty our senses of self can also experience a radical insecurity and one way in which this insecurity expresses itself is in the feeling that one’s gendered identity

is under threat. To me, this is a key dimension in understanding how anti-gender movements exploit fear, because they appeal to this sense of radical insecurity by promising security and stability through the eradication of gender. This point ought to have been made clearer in the book, because it is central to understanding the anti-gender ideology and what a counter-imaginary must take aim at.

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