

Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou
Dispossession: The Performative in the Political
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This book brings together one of the most influential feminist philosophers of our time and a powerful emerging voice in feminist theory. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou examine dispossession in the context of intensification of the regime of indebtedness that followed the global financial crisis of 2008. Their goal is to explore the multiple valences of the concept in relation to the performative force of bodies assembled in protest. Dispossession, they argue, has to be thought not only as a condition of deprivation but also as unchosen exposure to alterity. In this sense, dispossession might have an enabling dimension in that it unsettles the fantasy of the self-sufficient human subject and illuminates the constitutive aspect of relationality. In 2011, during the turbulent months in which encampments and protests spread from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, Butler and Athanasiou engaged in a wide-ranging conversation that occurred largely but not exclusively via email. The book, written as a dialogue that unfolds in short chapters, complicates the ongoing debate on the new forms of collectivity that emerged from the squares by foregrounding queer and feminist modes of enacting and counteracting dispossession.

Two important works come to mind when thinking about dispossession. The first is Edward Said's *The Politics of Dispossession*, a collection of essays published in 1994 that strenuously documents the presence of Palestine in spite of the losses of territory and social bonds inflicted by the consolidation of Israeli settler colonialism (Said 1994). The second is David Harvey's reflection on "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2003), a concept that builds on Marx's account of primitive accumulation (Marx 1990). Whereas for Marx the enclosure of land in sixteenth-century England that turned peasants into wage laborers was a circumscribed and necessary stage in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Harvey contends that under current neo-liberal regimes, dispossession of land, resources, and welfare provisions takes place continuously and on a global scale. The term "accumulation by dispossession" designates the constant reconfiguration of noncapitalist aspects of society into capitalist form. What is important here is that whereas Said and Harvey provide a framework that highlights the forcible, privative, and

material dimension of dispossession, Butler and Athanasiou are interested in exploring a supplemental but equally important nuance of the concept, what we might call the "psychic life" of dispossession. Ultimately, their goal is to weave the two aspects of dispossession together through a performative politics that allows for the emergence of forms of critical agency.

At the heart of the conversation, particularly in the first part of the book, is the ambiguity of dispossession, its double valence and troubling nature. On a first level, Butler and Athanasiou suggest that being dispossessed refers to the complex processes of disowning and abjection that produce the differential distribution of vulnerability and suffering among populations in the geopolitical landscape. In this sense, dispossession refers to the loss of land and community, legal status, and the rights connected to it. But it also refers to the privation of bodily self-determination and to the experience of norms of sex, gender, and kinship that determine whose bodies deserve a livable life. On a second level, dispossession designates the fundamental condition of interdependency and relationality that marks the formation of the human subject. As Butler and Athanasiou point out, one is always already dispossessed by the encounter with the other that signals the limits of the subject's self-sufficiency. People can be dispossessed by the norms of gender and sexuality but also by the forces of love and desire.

In a way, then, dispossession involves the undoing of the human (masculine) subject who can appropriate the world around him. This constitutive displacement of the self is what binds "us" together. From Butler and Athanasiou's perspective, naming dispossession as what propels us beyond ourselves might serve as a political resource in that it gestures toward the possibility of responsiveness and conjoined action. Some of the questions that arise throughout the book are: What makes responsiveness possible in a condition of dispossession? How does responsiveness become ethical-political engagement? How does it become a mode of responsibility that does not "appropriate" the dispossessed?

Among the tentative directions for answers, one seems specially intriguing: what is needed is an approach to dispossession that resists its privative aspect without seeking recourse to the logic of individual (re)appropriation of that which has been taken away. This question is particularly important for feminist politics in that it brings attention to the limits of the discourse of bodily ownership articulated by second-wave feminism through the slogan "my body is mine." Butler and Athanasiou make clear that the point of their critique is not doing away with feminist claims to bodily autonomy and self-determination but to account for the aporias that underwrite them. One of the challenges posed by this book is to reformulate claims of self-determination outside the logic of possessive individualism, the seventeenth-century conception in which the free individual is the proprietor of its own body and capacities. Unfortunately, Butler and Athanasiou do not spend too much time discussing these questions or engaging feminist debates on self-ownership. This is a limit of the book: it moves a little too fast and attempts to cover too much ground. Particularly, it moves too fast from the exploration of dispossession to the terrain of performativity.

As much of Butler's previous work has shown, performative politics simultaneously invokes and challenges the norms that produce and regulate racialized and gendered bodies. It takes place when those who do not count affirm their presence and right to exist. Importantly, Butler and Athanasiou's effort to think dispossession in relation to performativity was in part inspired by the uprisings that have been rocking the global political scene since the end of 2010. They make numerous references to recent political mobilizations, from the massive encampment in Tahrir, to the anti-austerity occupation of Syntagma Square, in central Athens, to Occupy Wall Street, and the struggles for public education in Europe. Although profoundly diverse in their claims, practices, and historical specificities, these movements share a number of features: the transformation of urban public spaces into encampments, the refusal of representation, and the articulation of forms of radical democracy. A number of political theorists, from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Jodi Dean and Alain Badiou, have responded to the uprisings with interventions that often center around the themes of organization and demands (Badiou 2012; Dean 2012; Hardt and Negri 2012). Butler and Athanasiou suggest that recent demonstrations show how performativity operates as an enacted politics. Bodies that assemble in public might not articulate a precise set of demands and yet they perform the demand to end conditions of precarity and dispossession that make life unlivable. At the same time, they perform a form of life characterized by those relations of equality whose absence produces precarity. In other words, they draw attention to structural inequality and indicate possible alternatives to it. Performative politics always implies a demand of institutional recognition but it also affirms the possibility of modes of living that exceed the very terms of recognition established by regulatory powers.

Butler and Athanasiou's book is one the rare contributions to the ongoing debate on the new social movements that consistently draws on and directs attention to the role played by feminist and queer politics in shaping political modes of alliance that are invariably bodily and affective. They do so in a variety of ways. Crucially, they question the tendency on the Left to reassert the "primacy of the economic," and offer valuable insights about the forces of feminization and racialization that structure contemporary states of indebtedness and insecurity. Further, Butler and Athanasiou see square encampments as Arendtian "spaces of appearance" that emerge through the performance of deeds and words and make explicit the human condition of plurality. But, against Arendt, they claim that the blurring of the distinction between public and private, at the heart of feminist and queer politics, is one of the key features of the life in the encampments.

The authors offer several productive examples of how specific feminist and queer practices and concerns have affected the protests. For example, feminist and queer groups involved in the occupation of Syntagma Square pushed against references to the Greek *polis* on the ground that ancient democracy functioned through the exclusion of women and slaves. Thus, these groups warned against the risk of idealizing forms of communitarian belonging that invoke plurality but end up privileging sameness over difference. On this particular point, Athanasiou's voice emerges with distinctive force. In the course of the book she returns over and over again on the importance of rethinking modes of belonging to a community that do not eradicate but multiply differences.

Following Jean-Luc Nancy, she proposes imagining the community "as an occasion in which people share precisely a certain impossibility of being-in-common" (117).

Athanasίου does an excellent job of pushing Butler to clarify her position on a number of topics, including the limits of the politics of recognition and the frequent use of Hannah Arendt's work on political agency. Yet one cannot help but notice that there is rarely disagreement between the authors. At times the book feels like a conversation *about* Butler's work rather than an encounter that challenges and provokes new thought. Moreover, in the exchange on the relationship between dispossession and performative politics, some important distinctions risk getting lost. For example, it is not entirely clear how being dispossessed is different from Butler's understanding of being precarious. Granted, both concepts arise from a theme that appears across Butler's corpus, that is, the valorization of "improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler 2004, 1). Still, there are moments in which one wonders how these categories diverge and supplement each other in the production of transformative thought and action. When Butler suggests that "the performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious---unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself---to demand the end to their precarity" (121), one wonders whether she could have written the same about the power of the dispossessed.

Readers fluent in Butler's work might not find this book particularly inventive. Nonetheless, it offers interesting points of entry into the practices of contemporary social movements. Notably, the conversation between Butler and Athanasίου brings to the fore feminist and queer post-identity approaches to the politics of the streets. Their vision of performative politics both invites critical questioning and unsettles the masculine style of militancy of much current political theory on riots and uprisings.

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