

BOOKS UNDER DISCUSSION

Judith Butler

CHI HA PAURA DEL GENDER?

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*by Gabriele Oliva**

We live in a time when the concept of gender has become a political and media target. Butler, with her essay, intervenes in this debate with her trademark rigorous lucidity, showing how the “gender panic” is nothing more than a rhetorical construction used to reinforce patriarchal and conservative models of power. The author's goal is clear: to deconstruct these narratives, bringing the debate back to critical and scientific ground.

He adopts complex and theoretical language, but each concept is presented with intellectual rigor. Although the book may be difficult to follow for those unfamiliar with contemporary philosophy and queer theory, it nevertheless offers a stimulating and provocative introduction to his broader ideas about gender.



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GENDER AS CONSTRUCTION AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

One of the book's strongest insights is the demonstration of how the concept of gender is, first and foremost, a social and normative construct (Stoller R. J., 1964). He takes up and expands on his earlier work, explaining how gender is not simply a biological issue, but a political discourse that redefines bodies and identities. The obsession with the so-called "Gender Ideology" is evidence of how conservative institutions perceive any attempt to deconstruct traditional roles as threatening.

In the first chapter, the author focuses primarily on how the issue of *gender* has become a topic of international political debate, analysing the global forces that contribute to making it an issue. She discusses the political context in which gender debates are developing, particularly in relation to globalization and the resulting social changes. Butler explores how the issue of gender is addressed in different societies, starting in the Western context, but then broadens the discussion to a global level, with a focus on human rights, religion, and politics (Butler, 2024).

One of the key issues that emerges from the first chapter is the tension between advances in civil rights and anti-modernist forces that seek to limit or -repress the rights of LGBTQ+ people. The author examines how international policies, as well as the domestic policies of various states, have addressed -or ignored- issues of gender identity and sexual orientation, often treating these issues as threats to cultural -tradition or -normality.

Within this global framework, the author highlights the diverse political and social reactions to gender issues, highlighting how anti-gender positions and related theories have often been fuelled by fears and prejudices rooted within specific cultural backgrounds. Indeed, the fear referred to in the title of the volume fits into this scenario, where the perception that the recognition of gender rights, may undermine the traditional social order.

The book also makes no shortage of references to how global politics and geopolitical dynamics influence the visibility and representation of gender identities, showing how these identities have been the subject of ideological and social conflicts. It also shows how gender theories have been received in different contexts, highlighting the difficulties in translating concepts that originate in the Western world, to other countries with different traditions and social structures (Amadiume, 1987). She thus offers a critical reflection on the global scope of the gender issue and its challenges, both theoretically and practically. Butler raises crucial questions about identity politics, the recognition of diversity, and the role of

international institutions in supporting, or at the same time, hindering gender rights.

Reflecting on the growing politicization of gender and the tensions between progress and conservatism around the world, the fear of gender, according to Butler, stems from the perceived threat to the traditional social order, which is defended through reactionary policies and cultural control devices.

A case in point is the enactment of the *Child Protection Law* in 2013 in Russia, which bans “homosexual propaganda” among minors, a measure Butler cites as an example of repressive legislation designed to limit LGBTQ+ visibility and rights.

Judith Butler examines and critiques the positions and even the reactions of the Vatican and the Catholic Church to gender theories and the growing visibility of LGBTQ+ rights. The author explores how religious positions, particularly those promoted by the Catholic Church, have affected the public debate regarding gender by presenting gender as a threat to religious “nature” and “tradition.” The Church, which has traditionally opposed any form of change in gender and sexuality norms, has reacted strongly against the emergence of theories and policies that recognize the fluidity of gender and the existence of non-binary identities, especially since the 1990s, with the LGBTQ+ rights movements gaining global space. According to Butler, the Vatican sees gender theory as a threat to the traditional view of family, marriage, and sexuality, which are for the Catholic Church anchored in a heterosexual and biologically determined model.

A central element of the Vatican's critique, as explored in chapter two, is the perception of gender as an “artificial” concept that denies the “truth” of nature (Ratzinger, 2004). In the author's disquisition: for the Church, the concept of gender is a social construct intended to subvert natural and moral distinctions, promoting a relativist view that threatens the absolute moral values upheld by the Catholic religion. In this sense, The Holy See's approach reveals a certain concern about losing dominion over those moral categories that have guided religious understanding of sexuality and human identity for centuries.

Butler reports official Church documents: such as encyclical letters and statements issued during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, condemning the adoption of a “relativist” view of gender and the spread of queer theories. These texts, according to Butler, not only oppose LGBTQ+ rights, but also theoretical thinking that questions the link between biological sex and gender identity, reinforcing the rigidity of male-female distinctions.

Another important aspect that is emphasized is how the Vatican's narrative regarding gender fits into a broader geopolitical vision. The Catholic Church is not only a religious institution but also a political power that has considerable influence around the world, and it is on a global scale that it seeks to defend its traditional vision, often intervening in national laws related to women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and sex education. Butler dwells on the contradiction between the Church's advocacy of "religious freedom" and its attempt to impose an unambiguous view of gender and sexuality globally. Indeed, while claiming to respect individual freedom, it seems to deny that freedom when it comes to issues related to the body, gender, and sexual orientation.

Following in the reading is an analysis of how conservative policies in the United States have intensified attacks against gender through legislative and media strategies. Here, then, is how the institutionalization of censorship against gender studies manifests itself through bans on teaching in schools and universities: as in the case of the "*Don't Say Gay*" law passed in Florida in 2022. Butler examines the role of religious and political lobbies, such as the *Alliance Defending Freedom*, in spreading the idea that gender is a threat to the social order and traditional values. This analysis highlights how such policies have concrete consequences on the lives of transgender and gender nonconforming people by limiting their access to health services, education, and social participation.

MORAL PANIC AND CONSERVATIVE STRATEGIES

Butler identified the idea of "moral panic" as a way to gain political support and justify discrimination. One of the main examples that is cited is the French movement "*La Manif Pour Tous*," which emerged in 2012 to oppose the egalitarian marriage bill. This movement organized nationwide demonstrations, participating in the spread of a new narrative redundancy that described gender as an ideology imposed to destroy the foundations of traditional society.

Moral panic, as in the idea elaborated by the author, results from the construction of an imaginary threat that justifies intransigent and reactionary policies. The author associates this phenomenon with other historical moments in which certain marginalized groups were instrumentalized to point to them as a dangerous threat to society. For example, she refers to the narrative used in the United States during the "Lavender

Scare” of the 1950s, when gay government employees were systematically removed based on the idea that they posed a danger to national security.

Butler studies the tactics deployed in more recent years by various government and right-wing groups to incite moral panic. A notable case is the anti-gender campaign in Poland initiated by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2019.

Andrzej Duda, the president of Poland, claimed that the LGBTQ+ movement was an assault on Poland's Christian heritage and argued that there was no gender other than male or female, characterizing gender ideology as 'more dangerous than communism.' This redundant oratory led to the emergence of so-called “LGBTQ+ free zones,” areas where local authorities explicitly state that they will not support or promote the rights of LGBTQ+ people. The Midwestern example is cited by the author as confirmation of a steady increase in anti-trans legislation passed in the United States in recent years, such as the vicious *North Carolina Bathroom Bill* of 2016, which banned transgender people from using public facilities aligned with the gender with which they identified. Although the bill was rescinded due to a huge backlash from civil society and big business, it still paved the way for similar policies in other states. Conservative strategy often exploits the emotional aspects of certain events to stir up feelings of fear in the population. Butler points out that the idea of the “child in danger” is one of the most recurrent justifications for authoritarian measures. A more recent example would be the disinformation campaign regarding 'gender ideologies' in Brazil, which was central to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 (Correa S., 2020).

The Brazilian leader repeatedly claimed that public schools were “teaching children to be gay,” stoking unfounded fears to gain electoral support.

Finally, as expressed earlier, emphasis is placed on the role of the Catholic Church in spreading gender-related moral panic: the Vatican, through official documents such as *Male and Female Created Them* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019), has expressed strong opposition to gender studies, portraying them as an attack on the natural order. This document has influenced educational policies in several countries, contributing to the censorship of inclusive school curricula.

Overall, the volume shows how moral panic is a deliberate strategy to reinforce gender and sexual hierarchies, preventing the advancement of civil rights. Its analysis gives readers the tools to recognize these mechanisms and develop critical arguments to counter anti-gender rhetoric through education and activism.

GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Butler, moreover, addresses intersectionality as central to understanding oppressions related to gender, race, social class, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989). The author points out how anti-gender policies are often intertwined with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and xenophobia. A significant example is the use of anti-gender rhetoric in Hungary under Viktor Orbán's government, where restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights are accompanied by anti-immigration policies and the construction of a nationalist narrative. Butler again cites the case of Poland, where the "Family Charter" promoted by the Law and Justice party in 2020 links the defense of the "traditional family" to the repression of sexual minorities and the exclusion of migrants. Through these examples, the author shows how the fight against gender ideology is part of a larger political project aimed at strengthening existing power hierarchies.

In response to repressive policies, the importance of resistance movements opposing anti-gender rhetoric and institutionalized discrimination is suggested. It reports on feminist and LGBTQ+ mobilizations globally, such as the protests in Argentina that led to the legalization of abortion in 2020, demonstrating how the concept of gender can become a powerful tool for empowerment. Another case in point is the protests against "LGBT-free zones" in Poland, which sparked a wave of international outrage, even leading the European Parliament to condemn them in 2021. Butler highlights how progressive movements have learned to leverage social media and transnational networks to build more effective and global forms of resistance that can be both networks of support and political pressure.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The author concludes the book by reflecting on possible future developments in the gender debate and the challenges ahead. She warns that although progressive movements have won important battles, conservative forces are gaining strength through new strategies of disinformation and repression. One example is the spread of the so-called "gender conspiracy theory" in Italy, propagated by groups such as *CitizenGO* and *Pro Vita & Famiglia*, which have influenced public discourse and educational policy.

Butler closes with a call to action: emphasizing the need for solidarity and alliance building among social movements to actively resist anti-gender ideology and work toward an inclusive future.

In her provocative and passionate analysis, as the title already suggests, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, a better understanding of contemporary gender politics and repression in the modern world emerges, contextual reasons and ways to resist are presented. I personally consider Butler's book a valuable academic reference and manifesto for social change, offering important insights into the power relations that shape the construction of gender identity from the perspective of sociological theories.

The volume is a seminal contribution to the field of critical gender theory, emphasizing the need for discursive resistance and academic activism.

Butler's work shows that anti-gender mobilization is a transnational phenomenon, based on a network of alliances among religious, political and institutional actors.

Finally, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* stands as a highly relevant work in the field of contemporary sociology, providing an in-depth and critical analysis of anti-gender rhetoric and its social implications. More important, this book contributes significantly to research on power and gender relations, but it also offers theoretical tools that help us participate in any public debate with depth and critical challenge, we can consider Judith Butler's work a book that not only deconstructs fear, but invites us to transmute it into action and resistance.

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