BOOK REVIEW: URGENT INTERVENTIONS

ANNA SZÖRÉNYI

Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Verso 2004.

> If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war.

This statement from the back cover of Butler's book *Precarious Life* aptly describes her project. What she makes of her own grief is a series of meditations on human vulnerability to others, meditations which seek to imagine a 'global political community' (xiii) in which vulnerability and dependence are causes for acknowledging shared interdependency, rather than for engaging in a violent and totalitarian defence of sovereignty and the suppression of dissent. In producing these thoughtful and eloquent essays, Butler is her own best example of what such considerations might achieve.

The five essays collected in *Precarious Life* pursue themes of the restriction of public debate and the dehumanisation of certain sections of the population in the name of 'national security', in the context of the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the subsequent development of the 'war on terror'. Butler responds critically to the labelling as 'excuseniks' of those who sought to ask about the reasons for the September 11 attacks, and the use of accusations of 'anti-Semitism' to suppress criticism of Israel. In addition she considers the refusal to publically mourn the victims of the Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan, and the victims of Israeli violence, as well as the implications of the indefinite detention of terrorism suspects in Guantanamo Bay, and the demonisation of the Middle East in the media.

Many of the points Butler offers on these issues have been well rehearsed within the anti-war movement, such as the observation that the war on terror is indefinitely extendable and unwinnable. It is disturbing that one of America's most sophisticated theorists must devote her time to such projects as explaining in step by step detail that '[a] criticism of Israel is not the same as a challenge to Israel's existence, and neither is it the same as an anti-Semitic act, though each could work in tandem with each of the other claims.' Other points, such as the observation that Israelis seem to qualify as victims of slaughter in the media in ways that Palestinians do not, are equally familiar. That Butler makes these points so carefully and clearly suggests two things: firstly that even relatively basic critical perspectives are becoming increasingly unspeakable within the US scene, and secondly that perhaps Butler is seeking a wider audience here, one less exposed to such critiques. Indeed at times one gets the sense that Butler is speaking urgently to *anyone* who might be listening, perhaps most importantly those whose statements she criticises, such as Lawrence Summers, the President of Harvard whose labelling of criticisms of Israel as 'effective anti-Semitism' is the catalyst for Chapter Four.

The written style of *Precarious Life* supports the latter interpretation. Like her recent *Undoing Gender* (2004), it does not read like the work of a writer with the reputation for sheer inaccessibility that Butler commands among some audiences. Here she demonstrates that her undeniable skills as a writer lend themselves not only to detailed theoretical exposition, but to concise, engaged, passionate and clear writing. Scholarly references are kept to a minimum, and with the possible exception of the discussion of Foucault's concept of governmentality in Chapter Four, no extensive theoretical knowledge is assumed. This is not, however, to say that the ideas presented in Precarious Life are all one-dimensional or obvious. It is a tribute to Butler's skills that her arguments remain sophisticated and always careful to avert simplistic readings. The result is a passionate and eloquent style of writing which conveys not only Butler's critical concerns but her emotional involvement. At times, especially in Chapters Two and Five, the writing becomes almost poetic in its directness, for example, discussing the impossibility of narrating our relationship with others, she concludes:

ISSN 1832-3898 © 2005 Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association

> Let's face it, we're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. (23).

Between and through its political interventions, the most interesting contribution of *Precarious Life* is its attempt to develop an ethics which encourages non-violence and respect for the other without resorting to Eurocentric notions of universal rights. The arguments made on this point are subtle, refreshing and productive. Butler suggests that meditation upon human vulnerability might become the basis for a tentative 'we' which acknowledges our mutual dependence on others, a condition which might be considered as universal, but which falls outside the regime of 'rights' as they are usually articulated, since it takes place prior to and outside the control of the individual subject. Recognition of the way in which 'we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own', Butler argues, might form the basis of a consideration of the ways in which such vulnerability is inequitably distributed across the globe. The experience of vulnerability, therefore, might offer an opportunity to acknowledge our responsibility towards each other, rather than a rationale for closing down all borders and all exchange in an impossible attempt to achieve absolute control and security.

Butler acknowledges that her concept of shared vulnerability may border on resurrecting a kind of universal humanism. She prefers, however, to locate it on a strategic register. The fact that only some people's vulnerability is honoured, she argues, demonstrates that recognition is crucial for sustaining it. Vulnerability is thus not foundational, but constituted, precisely through the act of recognition which the positing of a shared vulnerability performs. She is also careful to point out that the experience of vulnerability is variable, and that it is inequitably distributed across the globe. In the somewhat meandering argument of Chapter Two, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics', Butler explicitly addresses the concept of the human, not to argue for its universality but to point out that it is a status granted to some and denied to others: 'The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?' (20).Sections of this chapter literally reprint parts of *Undoing Gender*. Here, however, the analysis refers not only to those who live outside normative heterosexual gender relations, but to those relegated to the status of non-subject by increasing racial, ethnic and religious paranoia in the United States. Such dehumanisation takes place, Butler emphasises, not simply through 'dehumanising' statements, but through an absence of discourse which relegates certain lives to the status of unmournability. A life which is not publicly grievable is in some sense not a life at all, and its death therefore not quite a death. The effect is thus an erasure from public relevance.

In the final chapter, itself titled 'Precarious Life', Butler elaborates on this ethical relationship prior to subjectivity and its relation to humanisation and dehumanisation through a careful reading of certain moments in Levinas. In an evocative discussion, she reminds us that 'the face' which calls forth our responsibility to others is not to be confused with any literally visible face. Contrary to popular belief, then, the mere depiction of another's face is no guarantee of 'humanisation'. Indeed as Butler points out in relation to images of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, faces can be utilised by the media precisely to foreclose the ethical relationship, by being used to represent a pre-defined 'evil' already excluded from humanity. Although Butler's focus is primarily on the United States, this discussion offers useful starting points for thinking through issues currently being debated in Australia, for instance the frequent calls to 'humanise' refugees through depicting their faces. Butler acknowledges that it is necessary to make the demand for 'truer' images, but she concludes that the Levinasian 'face' is not representable, and that an image which seeks to invoke an ethical response needs to be an image which, in showing its own failure as accurate representation, evokes the precariousness and unknowability of the other. 'One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as

it is currently cultivated and maintained?' (151).

The discussion on 'indefinite detention' in Chapter Four, in which Butler considers Foucault's concept of governmentality in relation to the indefinite and arbitrary imprisonment of terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay, also seems highly applicable to the issue of mandatory detention of refugees in Australia. Pointing out that such detention takes place outside of legal jurisdiction and at the whim of unelected officials, Butler argues that a modified form of sovereignty is at work within governmentality, a sovereignty which gives administrative officials power over life and death and which serves as a justification for the use of law as a mere 'tactics' or 'instrument' in the service of sovereignty's pursuit of its own preservation. Butler's argument that something unprecedented and dangerous is taking place here, which urgently needs to be theorised, is timely and convincing. One interesting juncture is the way in which she takes up Agamben's concept of the 'state of exception' according to which states legitimise their suspension of the rule of law. Butler finds this argument useful, but points out that 'general claims' that 'we are all potentially exposed to [the] condition' of bare life do not attend to the ways in the power legitimised by the state of exception 'functions differentially, to target and manage certain populations, to derealize the humanity of subjects who might potentially belong to a community bound by commonly recognized laws; and they do not tell how sovereignty, understood as state sovereignty in this instance, works by differentiating populations on the basis of ethnicity and race' (67-8).

Throughout *Precarious Life*, Butler links her two themes of desubjectification and the restriction of public debate by emphasising that that to position certain statements as unsayable, or certain subjects as unmournable, is not only to limit the sphere of public debate, but to do so in such a way that the concept of the 'public sphere' comes to be *defined* precisely by the exclusion of certain topics and certain people. Butler's two central objects of criticism are thus inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. By the final chapter, this concern has become a call for the necessity of cultural criticism and a project for the humanities which Butler sees as crucial for the development of a society in which 'oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform'. (151).

Precarious Life reads as a book inspired by necessity and fed by political urgency, a missive sent out in the hope of averting still more violence before the suppression of debate becomes complete. This does not mean it is a manifesto. Butler 'confess[es] to not knowing how to theorize' the interdependency which she hopes might become the basis for political community. But her sense that such theorising is urgent and necessary is clearly evident. In the end, I cannot read this book without mixed feelings. That one of the English-speaking-world's foremost theorists has provided us with such a passionate and eloquent call for the value of thinking about our responsibility towards others, rather than resorting to panicked tactics of revenge and aggression, is a cause for appreciation. That such a book should have been necessary, however, is an occasion for mourning. Mourning both for those victims of imperialism who have, as Butler points out, thus far remained publically unmournable, and for the missed opportunities to acknowledge our shared vulnerability and responsibility that might have made aggression less inevitable.

Anna Szorenyi teaches at the Centre for Women's Studies & Gender Research at Monash University