



Who Sings the Nation-State?

Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak
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Who Sings the Nation-State? reads at first like a high level theoretical article that was published for some reason in book form, instead of being included in the critical anthologies that treat such weighty matters as statelessness, the relation between the ideas of the nation and the state, and the nature of power and sovereignty in contemporary, globalized democracies. Taking up the mantle of Foucault and Derrida, Butler and Spivak are two of the most provocative, dense, and difficult thinkers to come out of the theoretical boom that swept American universities in the 1970s and 1980s. Their continued work in the current century is all the more important after theory's supposed demise (see Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* on this point), when the kind of disembodied and deterritorialized power about which Butler speaks here has somehow managed to disarm the political potency of theory's primary concepts by mutating them into rhetorical buzzwords (diversity, multiculturalism, interdisciplinarity, transnationalism, identitarianism, etc.) bandied about by both politicians and college deans. The book begins with Butler implicitly yet overtly orienting her discussion of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* toward a critique of the Bush administration's policies, especially as they were manifested in the military prison at Guantánamo. If modern theory was born in the works of thinkers as diverse as Arendt, Benjamin, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Althusser, its common thread was precisely a critique and denunciation of the arbitrary, sinister, and downright illegal exercise of power by imperialist and fascist regimes in the 20th century. The conscious and deliberate critique of power that Butler carries out in the first of half of this book is hence an important continuation of a theoretical tradition that we as concerned citizens cannot allow to die, despite the apparent desire of some critics such as Eagleton to lay theory in its academic guise to rest.

Butler's well-known claim to fame is her application of Austin's venerable notion of the performative to the idea of gender. In *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, she extends the usefulness of this kind of analysis to a reading of Arendt's work on totalitarianism as a performative act within a specific historical and cultural context, that of the aftermath of World War II (28-29). In Butler's view, Arendt focuses more narrowly on "statelessness [...] as *the political phenomenon* of the 20th century" (29, Butler's italics). Curiously, statelessness itself is the consequence of a nation-state's attempts to solidify

its own identity and homogeneity, which it then defends through the institutionalization of “states of exception” that suspend constitutional rights, and hence undermine the very identity of the state (35). The feminist “twist” in all this concerns the status of life within such a political apparatus, in which Butler echoes Foucault’s famous notion of “bio-power” and its infiltrations into the very bodies and flesh of individuals. The conditions in which life is reproduced, in the “dark” domestic domain analyzed by Arendt (14-15), are hence ineluctably part of a political sphere in which individuals confined to the private or domestic realm –women, children, domestics, wet nurses, etc.– are often denied any political or economic agency, and hence are reduced to a permanent “state of exception” (37-38). As a consequence, Butler maintains that “no simple exclusionary logic can be set up between life and politics” (38). This also applies to “jettisoned” persons: “we understand the jettisoned life, the one both expelled and contained, as saturated with power precisely at the moment in which it is deprived of citizenship” (40). Butler provides a list of what these kinds of people look like in the real world: “the deported [...] those who fear deportation [...] those who live as *gastarbeiters* [*sic*] in Germany [...] Palestinians who are living under occupation”, etc. (42).

These considerations lead to a paradox that has been explored by a number of philosophers from Arendt to Agamben, and which Butler phrases in the form of the following maxim: “to have the nation-state is to have statelessness” (54-55). The question for Butler as for Arendt is how to get beyond the nation-state to something else that is more accepting of cultural differences, be it a “polity” or a “federation” as Arendt suggests. This is precisely where the notion of discursive performativity appears forcefully in Butler’s argument:

[Arendt’s] essay refers to “the end of the nation-state”. And she’s declaring it, in some sense. Other words come to take its place, sometimes “federation” and sometimes “polity”. The declaring does not make it so, but it is part of the discursive process of beginning something new; it is an inducement, an incitation, a solicitation. There is some wager over whether or not her speech will be efficacious. So then, finally, I want to think about efficacious speech, and how in certain kinds of political speech, assertions and declarations constitute a certain kind of wager. (55)

In contrast to the efficacy of speech within the nation state, Butler wants to consider “what makes for a non-nationalist or counter-nationalist mode of belonging” (58-59). The privileged example of this kind of phenomenon is what gives the book its title, in a brilliant analysis of undocumented Latin-American immigrants to the United States who began singing the US national anthem in Spanish as a performative mode of declaring precisely

this kind of belonging/not belonging within a very nationalist state. Butler's analysis of this phenomenon is the most intriguing and gratifying part of this book, and sees this strangely musical discursive act as a kind of "felicitous performative" that destabilizes the uniformity of a given nation-state at the same time that it points the way toward a radically new or different form of collective belonging, at the heart of which is the notion of a fundamental linguistic difference that requires continuous translation: "Both the ontologies of liberal individualism and the ideas of a common language are forfeited in favor of a collectivity that comes to exercise its freedom in a language or a set of languages for which difference and translation are irreducible" (62). As such, this reading of a possible move beyond the nation-state that incorporates a new and different mode of collective being requires a kind of theorization that was not imagined by either of this argument's two fundamental references, Arendt and Adorno.

The contradiction of a group of people that illegally proclaims its rights to belong in a language that is not officially recognized by the power of the state –George Bush proclaimed that the US national anthem had to be sung in English– results in a performative act that installs multiplicity and diversity in the heart of a political structure that lives on the false premise of homogeneity and uniformity. Moving beyond the nation-state hence involves accepting diverse aporias and paradoxes that point the way to possible political entities that might allow for the existence of new cultural identities: "Once we reject the view that claims that no political position can rest on performative contradiction, and allow the performative function as a claim and an act whose effects unfold in time, then we can actually entertain the opposite thesis, namely, that there can be no radical politics of change without performative contradiction" (66). From this renewed theoretical point of view, politics will always include a series of public and discursive demonstrations by groups of people demanding previously unforeseen rights and possibilities of the presumed monolith of the nation-state. Furthermore, what one might call the "post-nation-state" from this perspective would have to assume a contradictory and multiple performativity as the basis of its paradoxical unity, requiring as-yet non-existent theoretical and constitutional formulations toward which Butler's work here points the way.

Spivak's contribution to this consideration of "the decline of the nation-state" describes the role of globalization and international capital in this process, along with a discussion of the somewhat contradictory phenomena of "sub-nationalism" and "critical regionalism". At an interesting moment in Spivak's presentation, Butler diplomatically asks for clarifications of these terms (84-86), highlighting the role of "post-national" institutions such as the European Union in fostering a kind of permanent "statelessness" and disenfranchisement for illegal workers within its borders. Spivak responds to this request with an extensive excursus on the idea of "cosmopolitheia", its origins in Kant, Derrida's critique of it in *Rogues (Voyous)*, and the more utopian treatment of the idea in Habermas, whom Butler had already mentioned (86-91). At the end of this response, we begin to get an inkling of

what Spivak means by “critical regionalism”: “[Arendt is already] thinking the nation and the state separately. Derrida will later call this undoing of the connection between birth and citizenship the deconstruction of genealogy in *Politics of Friendship*. And that is where critical regionalism begins” (91). The truth is that Butler and Spivak are speaking in this dialogue from radically different states of “situatedness” that almost render their exchange incomprehensible. How can a Euro-centric American and an Asia-centric naturalized American find common ground upon which they may discuss the key issues of statelessness and the supposed end of the nation-state? When Spivak finally provides us with an oblique definition of the term that Butler was seeking, we see that this new kind of “concept” is perhaps willfully sloppy and unruly, as it would have to be if the new kinds of collective identities that these thinkers are imagining were to be described by it: “In my next book *Other Asias*, I am recognizing, as does everyone, that China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries is a region. India and Pakistan, with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Sikkim, and Nepal, make South Asia. This region has unilateral connections with China, and Pakistan with West Asia. Japan, as a group of eight states, relates to all of these in still another way. The war in Iraq has involved them in yet another way. Can these regional cross-hatchings happen in a less random way to produce something other than nation-statism, tied by national sovereignty, to check post-cold war Euro-US’s perennial dream of universalism?” (91-92). Critical regionalism from this perspective hence might be understood as the loose association of existing nation-states that act together in order to shift global balances of power. The interesting question from this perspective would hence concern the notion of cultural and group identities for people who migrate within and among these new, conglomerate regions.

One of the puzzling features of *Who Sings the Nation-State?* is its insistence on the orality of these interventions, at the same time that the text erases the temporal and spatial specificity in which these discourses were enunciated. In simpler terms, we as readers know nothing about the date and the place of the event at which these speeches were given. In keeping with this effacement, Spivak’s brief intervention is interrupted near the end of the book by a question and answer period in which only one of the interlocutors is identified in passing. A question from the audience thus forces Spivak to return to the “abstract” nature of the state (94-97), a problematic notion that seems to be readily accepted by both interlocutors. If the “war on terrorism” has demonstrated anything since the attacks on New York in 2001, not to mention Althusser’s now ancient theory concerning ideological apparatuses of the state, it’s that a few given states can bring very concrete and considerable material means to bear against other states in the name of protecting their survival and “way of life”. In other words, if contemporary states as we understand them begin in abstract structures, it is clear that their continued existence today beyond their “expiration date”, so to speak, is to be found in a terrifying array of material and concrete institutions and practices, among which are those (armies, police forces, border patrols and fences, detention centers, shifting laws, customs offices,

labor ministries) that impose statelessness on large groups of people. Spivak proclaims, "The state is a minimal abstract structure which we must protect because it is our ally" (98). After having reached this point, the reader of this intentionally provocative "text" –and the book's status as a text is interrogated in an interesting way by its format– simply has to abandon the hope that the idea of critical regionalism will be defined in a clear way by either of the speakers. The session trails off in the dispersed question and answer period that touches on topics as diverse as "race and class in European society" (94), Confucianism and Buddhism as part of ethical globalism (a question which elicits an interesting response from Spivak on "Creole Buddhism", 99), the strategic potential of sovereignty (101), resurgent nationalism versus post-nationalism (110-111), "Messianism in Arendt and mythopoetics" (114), etc. In the end, the reader is left with the impression that this discussion covered an enormous conceptual ground, and that both speakers made large and important claims that could perhaps be better expressed in concrete analyses of specific events, such as the singing of the US national anthem in Spanish with which Butler began. *Who Sings the Nation-State?* is a frustrating book in this respect, in that it holds out the promise that it will explicate radically productive concepts, while the format in which these were expressed, including the improvised remarks of the question-answer period, leaves the reader longing for a more complete and coherent exposition of these fascinating ideas. The important contribution of this book, however, is that it orients its readers toward the crucial areas of research that both of these important thinkers are currently exploring, which have political and personal implications for all of us.

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