

KİTAP İNCELEMESİ / BOOK REVIEW

THE PSYCHIC LIFE OF POWER: THEORES IN SUBJECTION

Judith BUTLER

(California: Stanford University Press, 1997)

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Author is a feminist theorist who has significantly impacted since the early 90s, especially with her books on gender. Butler, who comes from a Jewish family, received her first philosophical education at Sinegog. After completing her doctorate at Yale University, Butler wrote: "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (Tyler, 2019).

In this book, Butler explains the concepts of subject formation, psyche and gender. She states that we are accustomed to thinking of power as a force that exerts pressure on the subject from the outside, subordinates the issue, and places the subject in a lower order, but at the same time, we depend on this concept for our existence. She also approaches Foucault in stating that power constitutes the subject (Foucault, 2021a). Butler expresses this in her work as follows: "If, following Foucault, we understand power as the founder of the subject, the condition of its existence, and the trajectory of its desire, then power will be something that we not only resist, but also something that we strongly depend on for our existence, something that we harbour and hide within our being (Butler, 1997, p72)." However, Foucault's reticence, especially on the psyche, has encouraged Butler to work on this point.

Stating the main differences between the Marxist understanding of power and the Foucauldian understanding of power, Butler says that an essential part of the problematics of the Foucauldian sense of power is related to the concept of "subordination". What Althusser calls "summoning", the situation in which power summons the subject, subjectivises it and simultaneously determines its point on the analytical plane of society, is a semi-fictional effort. According to Butler, this situation secretly merges with the divine model. The religious model emphasises "speech", whereas Althusser emphasises "summoning". On the one hand, Foucault's notion of discourse opposes theories such as Althusser's, in which invocative speech is the dominant model. Still, at the same time, it evaluates the activity of discourse by separating it from its embodiment in the form of the spoken word.

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Foucault's reformulation of subalternity as something that oppresses the subject and constitutes the subject, that is, oppresses the constitution of the issue, implies the ambivalence of the subject's genesis. Power becomes decisive in the form of the subject through subordination. Power is external to the subject and, at the same time, literally the subject's space. According to Foucault (Foucault, 2021b), power's constitutive and generative nature is linked to regulatory and disciplinary regimes.

Butler states that a critical analysis of subordination should include the following studies:

1- To explain how regulatory power keeps subjects in subalternity by exploiting and producing their demands for continuity, visibility and space;

2- To be aware of the fact that the subject, which is produced as continuous, visible and established, is nevertheless haunted by an unassimilable residue, a melancholy that shows the limits of subjectification;

3- It involves an account of how the agency can resist or transform the social modes that give rise to it, namely the recursivity of the subject.

Foucault states that the concern of modern politics is no longer to liberate the subject but to examine the regulatory mechanisms through which 'subjects' are produced and maintained. Butler then touches upon the commonalities between Hegel and Foucault and shows how Hegel views the formation of consciousness. Consciousness, in its endeavour to separate itself from the functions of excretion, essentially from its excretory identity, relies on a 'mediator' whom Hegel calls a 'priest'. This bodily consciousness dedicates everything it 'does' to the priest or preacher to reconnect with the pure and unchanging. This intermediary agent frees the abhorred consciousness from its responsibility for its actions. Everything that the abhorred consciousness offers through consultation and appeal, i.e., all its externalities - including its desire, labour and excreta - are understood as offerings, as the price of penance. The priest institutionalises bodily self-denial as the price of holiness; he elevates the rejecting gesture of defecation to a religious practice in which the whole body is ceremonially purified. The sanctification of disgust takes place through the rituals of fasting and ordeal. Since the body cannot be wholly denied, as in stoic thought, it must be rejected through practices. By withdrawing itself from the pleasures of consumption, the unhappy consciousness, which gives itself over to fasting and asceticism, thinks that it can avoid the inevitability of the moment of defecation. As self-condemning bodily acts, fasting and suffering are spontaneous acts that turn the body against itself. At the limits of this ordeal and self-sacrifice, the abhorred consciousness seems to base its action on the priest's consultation, but this basing only conceals the reflexive origins of self-punishment.

The idea that morality is based on a certain kind of violence is already known. However, what is surprising is that such violence constitutes the subject. Morality internalises this violence in the subject while producing the subject as a reflexive being. This partly led Nietzsche to think of morality as a kind of disease. Stating that conscience is a necessary fiction, Butler adds that Nietzsche views it as a creative force. According to Freud, the power of conscience is fuelled precisely by the phenomena it forbids: aggression. Butler interprets the views of Nietzsche and Freud on morality and conscience.

Butler emphasises that subjectification and the state of being imprisoned in one's subjection cannot be explained without recourse to psychoanalytic explanations, and it is precisely at this point that Butler differs from Foucault. However, he also opposes the theories in which the unconscious is seen as a necessary resistance, and at this point, he reunites with Foucault.

According to Foucault, the subject is first constituted and then endowed with sexuality by the power regime. However, suppose the process of the subject's formation requires the initial containment of sexuality and a constitutive prohibition that forbids a specific desire while itself becoming the focus of passion. In that case, the subject is formed through a ban that both prohibits and moulds sexuality and the subject is said to bear this. This view conflicts with Foucault's idea that psychoanalysis presupposes the exteriority of the law to desire since, according to it, no desire can exist without the rule that moulds and sustains the desire it forbids.

After commenting on the concept of conscience, Butler mentions that conscience subjectivises us all, and in this section, she comments on Althusser. She attempts to reread Althusser's article to understand how Althusser's concept of "calling" is fundamentally figured through religious examples. The exemplary status of religious authority highlighted the paradox of how the possibility of subject formation depends on a passionate search for recognition that cannot be separated from a conviction within the concepts of religious precedent.

In the next chapter, Butler returns to Freud and comments on gender rejection, melancholia and the rejection of identification. She sees the source of heterosexuality in forbidden homosexuality and forbidden incestuous relationships. Stating that gender is based on imitation, the author illustrates this point through transvestism: If a man performs transvestism as a woman (the term "transvestite" is used in the text), the "imitation" said to be transvestism is taken as an imitation of femininity; but it is not understood that the "femininity" imitated by the man is itself an imitation. If, however, gender is something that is acquired and assumed to be about ideals that anyone can fully live, then femininity is an ideal that everyone always and only imitates. The trans, therefore, reveals that gender itself is an imitation.

Adam Phillips, in his commentary on Butler (the second part of chapter 5 of the book), says that social identity is also an imitation of imitation: If, as Freud says, the character is formed through identification - if the self likens itself to what it once loved - then the character is something close to a caricature, that is, an imitation of an imitation. Like the artists Plato wanted to ban, we make copies of copies of copies. Still, unlike Plato's painters, we have no original, only an endless series of resemblances to someone who does not exist. Freud's notion of character is a parody of the Platonic work of art; his theory of character formation through identification ridicules all ideas of the existence of a substantial character.

In her last words, Butler emphasises that The power exercised over the person is the power that animates their birth, and there seems to be no escape from this ambivalence. In fact, without ambivalence, 'no' human being appears to exist; that is, the fictionalisation necessary to become a self turns off the possibility of a bounded identity..

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