**PLS 461 | The Politics of Mourning**

> In a speech expressing his solidarity and sympathy with the French, US President Barack Obama said, "This is an attack not just on Paris, it's an attack not just on the people of France, but this is an attack on all of humanity and the universal values that we share." Of course, the attack on the French is an attack on humanity, but is an attack on a Lebanese, an Afghan, a Yazidi, a Kurd, an Iraqi, a Somali, or a Palestinian any less an attack "on all of humanity and the universal values that we share"? What is it exactly that a North American and a French share that the rest of humanity is denied sharing?[1]

Today's reading assignment was excerpt from Judith Butler's book *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable*, which was reprinted on the website Verso Press in the days after the November 2015 Paris attacks of 2015.[2] For me, the question we might ask, as did Jacques Rancière did in the wake of the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings, is what is the relationship between the policies of the state and the affect of tragic events? Are the policies of nationhood, which define Frenchness as a cultural prerequisite for acceptable citizenship, also related to global dispositions of mourning?

Let's begin with some of the terms Butler uses to describe the fragility of the world today:

A. precariousness
B. affect
C. ethics
D. recognition
E. outrage

Butler draws many of these keywords from from Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish philosopher (and former prisoner of war) who contemplates individual responsibility against the backdrop of the 20th century's most brutal wars. How might we embrace and respect others in ways that prevent the unjust use of violence? For Levinas, we must come face to face with those who we do not know as a precondition for the recognition of our common world, within which we are all precarious because we depend on eachother with a great deal of uncertainty. We cannot regulate our political relationships through the state, nor on the ingenuity of self-preservation. Instead, Levinas argues, we need to move beyond individuality (self-preservation) and toward and "ethical self."[3] An ethical self compares, judges, recognizes, and speaks the names that states would rather keep anonymous.

Consider some of the following quotations: "[o]nly under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear." Now consider the events in Paris, Belgium, or Orlando. Why do those lives matter to you? To the same conditions apply in each case? These cases are irregular anomalies, statistical glitches in the rational modernity of nation-states, which police territory to protect against external threats.

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[1] Hamid Dabashi, "Je suis Muslim," *Al Jazeera* 15 November (2015). < http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/11/je-suis-muslim-151114163033918.html >.
[2] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, New York: Verso Press, 2009.
[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *entre nous: Thinking-Of-the-Other*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. P. 202.

However, the state can only come into being through the value we place in the loss of life in war. "We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not." Butler demonstrates that state attempts to distinguish between grievable and ungrievable lives runs from the Greek tragedy of Antigone to the post-9/11 era. The state, she argues, does not like the mention of individual names. In the Antigone play, a civil war between two brothers ends in the death of both. The King, taking sides, decrees that one brother (Eteocles) should be buried but not the other (Polynices). Their sister defies the power of the King (the state) to ensure that both brothers are buried according to religious tradition.

Butler's argument also resembles the opening pages of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1982) which addresses the unmarked Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers to argue that leaving out names allows for citizens to recognize nationhood above and beyond individuals. Along these lines, grieving for France resembles Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, since our recognition of others is organized along civilizational and cultural lines. On one hand, this argument might seem to devolve into a binary of state violence (acceptable) and non-state actors (unacceptable), or violence against citizens of the West (unacceptable) and the rest ("it happens all the time"). But even states determine between grievable and ungrievable citizens. Consider the death of Kenji Goto at the hands of Isis (or even fellow ISIS captive Haruna Yukawa, who is not only considered less grievable but less named within the context of their deaths). Upon hearing of her son's death, Goto's mother was quoted, "[i]t is my only hope that we can carry on with Kenji's mission to save the children from war and poverty." But for affect to drive policy, grief must be converted into outrage.

Here are some possible applications of Judith Butler's position:

1. *Equality*: we should grieve <u>all</u> victims of terror (state terror & non-state terror), since we see the precariousness of all lives—including our own—in the violation of their's.

2. *Recognition*: I (Us) + You (Them) = a constantly shifting (accommodating) version of us that transcends nationhood and its complementary version of the world called geopolitics. This idea of recognition resides at the basis of cosmopolitanism, hospitality, humanity, etc.