

Butler and Foucault on the constraints of creativity and self-invention

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Judith Butler (born 1956) is an influential American contemporary thinker. She is well known for her works in the theory of gender. Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984) was an outstanding European philosopher of the XX century. One of his major contributions to the philosophy and science was a critical history of modernity. This essay is focused on their attitude to the problem of human creativity and self-invention which attracted both thinkers. My goal is to show the connection between Foucault's idea of critical history and Butler's understanding of the gender as a historical category.

Foucault's views on the problems of modernity are summarized in one of his last works, "What is Enlightenment?" written in 1984. He takes an understanding of the modern soul from Charles Baudelaire (1821 - 1867) [1]:

Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself.

Are there any limits to this creativity? Foucault's answers positively and defines the *ethos of the moment* (the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution [2]) with a reference to them [1]:

This philosophical ethos may be characterized as a limit-attitude.

He formulates the new vision of philosophical critique [1]:

That criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.

Modern approach to critique should help in understanding our limits and going beyond them [1]:

This work done at the limits of ourselves must ... put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take.

Foucault's historical investigations are telling the story of a progress as a form of greater social control and homogenization [3]. It limits the human self-invention abilities.

Where are the "changeable points" in this unlucky situation? This is the starting point for Butler. She understands Foucault's *critical attitude* as a question of finding the new governing principles [4]:

The question is not how to become radically ungovernable. It is a specific question that emerges in relation to a specific form of government: "how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them."

The goal of Butler's critique is maximization of the chances for livable life [5]:

The critique of gender norms ... must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life.

She examines the history of gender and finds that conformance of a person's sexual habits to the accepted social norms is crucial for making the life livable. For her gender is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint [6]. The set of these constraints plays a major role in the possibilities of such improvisation. She suggests to review this set and enhance it. And states the guidance for this process [5]:

To cease legislation for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some.

Both of the authors saw the homogenization and social oppression as the forces which limit human creativity. Foucault proposed new philosophical ethos to be able to dig into this problem and attack it. Butler took Foucault's method, enhanced it and applied to the gender problems. As a result, a new theory of gender appeared and movements for protecting the rights of different sexual minorities evolved. The final results of these activities are not totally clear today. Some people think they will help to liberate human being and increase our creative possibilities. Others are more pessimistic. However, both of these groups might agree that it's a turning point in the history of human kind and it shows that philosophy is once again is dealing with the major challenges of the time.

References

1. Foucault, Michel. *What is Enlightenment?* (1984).
2. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. [*Ethos*](#).
3. Michael S. Roth. *From Critical Theory to Postmodernism, part 3 of 4. Video lecture*.
4. Judith Butler. [*What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue \(2001\)*](#).
5. Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender (2004)*.
6. Michael S. Roth. *Postmodern Identities, part 2 of 4. Video lecture*.