

The Other and the Real. How Does Judith Butler's Theorizing of the Subject and Contingency Differ from the New Lacanian Thought?

Jaana Pirskanen

Conceptualizing cultural norms and political agency is at the core of feminist and queer theory. Therefore, it is important to explicate the consequences of different theoretical traditions for conceiving subjects and contingency. In this article I focus on Judith Butler's thought and its relationship to the new Lacanian work of Slavoj Žižek and Lee Edelman. By new Lacanian work I refer to writings based on Lacan's later work from the 1960s and the 1970s, which emphasize the concepts *real* and *jouissance*.¹

In her work Butler adopts psychoanalytical insights, when she theorises the culturally constructed subject, but her own thought is not psychoanalytical as such. Rather, her thought is based on Foucault and Hegel, and her theory is inspired by the psychoanalytical thinking of Freud, Lacan and Laplace. In this article I will discuss the meaning of the terms *unconscious* and *real* in Butler's and Lacanian thought. I will show how Butler's theorising differs essentially from that of Žižek, who is a theorist of ideology and contingency, as well as from Edelman's queer theoretical work. The differences between these thinkers have important consequences for conceiving contingency and the political agent: in Butler's thought subjects subvert the existing norms by disloyal reiterations, whereas according to Žižek's and Edelman's perception change

cannot be planned or articulated beforehand, but the subject challenges the existing structures by performing an impossible act.²

Furthermore, I suggest that Butler's thought differs from Lacanian thinking in its form: while the new Lacanian thought relies on the topology of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, Butler refuses to posit theoretical systems and instead aims at keeping the concepts she uses in a constant motion. Butler's non-foundational attitude can be traced back to her Hegelian influences.

The unconscious in Butler's thought

Butler's thought has an intense relationship with psychoanalysis. On the one hand, she is critical of Lacan's understanding of gendered positions in relation to the phallus, as well as the Lacanian concept real (*le réel*) (Butler 1993; 2000), but on the other hand, she insists on discussing with psychoanalytically inspired thinkers. Butler engages in this discussion, because her aim is to outline subjectification, the way in which subjects are initiated into being and concurrently regulated by cultural norms. Social normativity cannot be theorized without considering the psychic

SQS
01/08

1

QueerScope
Articles

Jaana
Pirskanen

reality. In Butler's thought the norms and meanings of a social space give birth to the subject's psychic space, and the desires are formed in the chiasm of the personal and the social. Butler also persistently thinks about change and resistance of cultural norms, as do several psychoanalytical thinkers. This leads her into an intense debate with psychoanalysis.

The term *unconscious* has an important role in Butler's work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), where she attempts to contemplate ethics based on the idea of fundamental opacity, dependency and vulnerability of a human subject. Butler illustrates the intimate tie between the subject and its environment with Laplanche's seduction theory and Foucault's thought. The main question in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is the possibility of ethical subjecthood based on the understanding of the fundamental opacity and relationality of the human subject. However, I will focus on opacity and the unconscious and leave the discussion on ethics aside for now.

When Butler refers to Laplanche in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005, 20, 54–55, 58, 65, 71, 134), or to psychoanalysis in general, she uses the term *unconscious*, whereas in relation to Foucault she writes about the impossibility of knowing oneself without the mediation of historical discourses and about the difficulty of being a reflexive subject (ibid., 117, 120, 134). She also uses several other ways of explaining the unconscious of the subject, which shows that she deliberately aims at shifting the meaning of the word *unconscious*. Butler does not posit a psychic

register, but the term *unconscious* works in her text as a synonym for *opacity* (ibid., 40, 41, 46, 63, 64, 66, 69, 80, 81, 84, 103) *non-narrativizable* (ibid., 79, 83, 135), *unspeakable* (ibid., 135), *inarticulable* (ibid., 60), *unknowingness* (ibid., 136), *irrecoverable* (ibid., 20), "my foreignness to myself" (ibid., 84), "failure to narrate fully" (ibid., 64), and "the limit to self-understanding" (ibid., 83). Butler does not aim at building a topology of a human psyche, but she attempts to describe the subject's impossibility of transparency, her difficulty of being a reflexive subject and narrating the formation of herself. Butler's strategy against "topologization" is keeping the descriptions in motion.

Butler describes the formation of the subject in relations to the Other and the others, both to cultural norms and actual other people. From the start, the subject is outside of itself, addressed before it can address. Being ek-static, existing essentially because of the others also means that one is unable to narrate or know oneself fully. Hence, the opacity or the unconscious are the result of one's passivity in relation to the conditions of one's existence as a subject, and this passivity persists through one's life. (Butler 2005.)

For Butler, one's own desire is a product of a foreign desire. She illustrates her perception with Laplanche's thought and describes how, for Laplanche, an infantile body is touched, fed, made to sleep and established as the subject and object of speech by the others. Caregiving adults touching the infant transmit messages of the sexualized adult world to the child, who experiences these messages

as incomprehensible and overwhelming. The tactile signs enable the 'I' to come into being, into subjecthood, but the subject is unable to recover them. Laplanche calls this initiation of the subject the primal seduction scene, and according to him, one's own desire is a product of a foreign desire that is internalized via the others' touches. A certain indistinguishability exists between the other and myself at the heart of who I am, and the situation is asymmetrical from the start, since the 'I' is passive and disarmed in its relation to the messages of the others. There is no ready-made ego equipped with its own internal drives, since the interiority of an ego is formed in relation to one's environment. Thus, the unconscious of a subject is not its own unconscious, but is born in relation to the others. (Butler 2005, 70–76, 97.)

Laplanche's thought is useful for Butler, because he does not describe the limit to full articulation as a consequence of the Lacanian real (I will discuss Butler's critique of the concept of the real later), but as a consequence of the enigmatic others, of the overwhelming impressions imposed on the child by the adult world.

Butler also turns to Foucault's thought of subject formation in the historically instituted order of ontology, and writes that "there is no possibility of pure and unmediated relation of myself to my will, conceived as free or not, apart from the constitution of myself, and its modes of self-observation, within a given historical ontology." (Butler 2005, 109.) For Butler, Foucault's point is that when a subject becomes reflective of itself, it also misses something about

itself. Our capability to reflect upon ourselves comes at a price, since it is formed according to prevailing norms and by specific modes of rationality that emerge historically. Also, the modes of address constitute our ways of telling about ourselves: the other person's discourse seduces us to a self-reflection in that particular relation. For Foucault there is no transhistorical subject, but one that exists and can give an account of oneself in relation to the historical time and discourse. (Butler 2005, 121, 125, 130–132.)

Thus, Butler illustrates her own view through Foucault's and Laplanche's thought. She agrees with Laplanche that primary impressions are bound up with the formation of an ego and the establishing of the unconscious. She also agrees with Foucault that being a reflexive subject is bound up with the existing norms and other people. One cannot tell who she or he is without knowing the conditions of her or his being. For Butler, the opacity of oneself is primarily a result of social dependency, since a subject is in an essential manner relational. However, understanding the fundamental incoherence and opacity of a human subject does not do away with the possibility of agency, but it makes one understand how agency is tied to other people and historical discourses. From the start, in the place where the ego will be, there is the other (Butler 2005, 52). My subjectivity, my desire, my language and my mode of rationality are initiated from the outside.

The unconscious and the real in Lacanian thought

For Butler, the subject is based on the social and it is irrecoverably outside of itself. The way one can aim at knowing oneself is to look at the historical conditions of one's existence. Next, I will clarify the similarities and differences between Lacanian thought and Butler's theorising of the subject and the unconscious.

Butler's thinking and Lacanian thought are based on different theoretical methods. Butler's theorising is deliberately sketchy and avoids forming an account of the structure of the psyche, and she constantly slides the meanings of the concepts she uses, while Lacanian thought is based on the topology of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. Certainly, the manner in which Lacan theorised can hardly be claimed to be rigid, since he continued to develop his thought throughout his career. Nevertheless, the new Lacanian thought, for instance that of Slavoj Žižek's, is based on the late Lacanian ontological structure of the real and the symbolic. The aim is to clarify the underlying ahistorical structure, to define the logic by which language always fails. This differs from Butler's philosophical attitude, which can be characterized as non-foundational. Her way of sliding concepts can be traced back to her Hegelian influences. The beneficial effect of Hegel's thinking can be found in the *models* of thinking processes he provides: completing thinking is not set as the aim of it. It does not seek to find the bottom of things or to establish the conditions for what is and can be, but keeps the concepts in motion. (Butler 2000a, 21–24; Butler

2000b, 172–173; Pulkkinen 2007.)

What is common to both Butler and the Lacanians is their focus on society and subjectification, and not on the inner depth of a human subject for itself. The term *unconscious* refers to the subject's origin in the Other, to the fact that the subject is born in relation to language and cultural norms. Psychoanalysis is founded on the idea of the unconscious. According to Lacan's groundbreaking idea, Freud's term *unconscious* was something entirely else than the notion used by thinkers that preceded Freud. Instead of understanding Freud's unconscious as a psychological category, Lacan depsychologizes the unconscious. It does not merely relate to childhood memories and individual histories, but works between people. The unconscious refers to the discourse of the Other in oneself, to desires and fantasies that the ego is not conscious of and that are inherited from the parents, the social environment and cultural values. In Lacan's thought the unconscious is understood as linguistic and historical. The unconscious is an organised system of letters, a formal system that enables certain relations and obstructs others. The subject is split into conscious ego and unconscious order that breaks the coherent meanings of the ego. The meaning that is given to these breaks and mistakes in language is created afterwards. (Fink 1995, 4, 8–9, 19, 22, 45; Dean 2000, 7–9.)

Besides the essential concept of the unconscious, the Lacanian subject is described topologically, that is, the tensions in a subject are described through a structural division into three orders – the real, the imaginary and the

symbolic. These three orders cannot be understood independently, but rather as essentially intertwined. The three orders can also be used for describing the psychoanalytical development story of a human individual, the course of psychoanalytical therapy, and in Žižek's thought, also the ideologies and the ontological order of 'all' and 'non-all'.

According to the psychoanalytical development story, coming into language separates the child from the mother and the child loses the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of being one with her. On the other hand, this primary *jouissance* is also understood to be illusionary or mythical, because the child actually never experienced the full satisfaction. Entering into language and into the symbolic law creates the idea that full *jouissance* would be possible to attain, if it was not for the law that restrains it. Alienation is a central term in Lacanian thought. In symbolisation, the child submits to the meanings that the symbolic order places and loses himself as a whole, and thus becomes alienated into language. Language enables communication, brings meaning to the body and its functions and changes one's needs to desire. It splits the subject into the unconscious and the conscious. Being split is the only way the subject can exist. (Fink 1995, 12, 45, 49, 101.)

Thus, language brings with it the world of meaning and alienates the subject from its real being. Desire is formed in the discourse of the Other. *Objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, emerges when the child is separated from the mother, and thus the *objet a* can be understood as a remainder of the illusion of the full *jouissance*. By attaching

itself to *objet a*, the subject attaches itself to the illusion of one's coherence. What the subject desires is not the object as such (sex, money, gadgets, art, sports etc.), but the *objet a*, the element in the object that the subject 'believes' to satisfy its desire. *Objet a* is always more than any concrete object itself. Desire as such has no substantial consistency. Thus, *objet a* links the body to the symbolic. Desire and the subject are the results of language, and if the primary split would be overcome, that would be the end of desire and the subject (Fink 1995, 54, 59; Dean 2000, 47–50, 59, 67, 77, 201).

The symbolic order creates the reality where the subject speaks and thinks. What is not in language does not exist, since language brings things into existence. The subject's own ego, which works in the area of the imaginary and through the logic of sameness and coherence, is formed by identification with other people. Language is an important part of these identifications, since parents and other people attach different values to objects, and consequently direct the child's identifications. (Fink 1995, 25, 36.)

The concept of real describes the impossibility that is inherent in language. The real is a paradox in the sense that it does not exist, it is a hole in the symbolic order, but it is nevertheless described as a source of contingency. It describes the limit inherent in the symbolic and the subject, and enables them to change. Thus, the real is a structural necessity that does not exist in itself. The real is posited only retroactively by the symbolic. (Žižek 1989, 163–173, 205–207; Žižek 2006, 26.)

Thus, both Butler's thinking and Lacanian thought focus on the subject and the social, but with a different theoretical approach to structures. My explication of the central terms in Lacanian thought here is very brief, but we can nevertheless see differences in Butler's and Lacanian theorizing: Butler does not posit any necessary or ahistorical structures. For her, the psyche is formed by the social, it has historically contingent origins. The posited structures might result from a certain historical society. For Butler, the reason why no name ever fully describes a subject is the result of particularity: every subject is constituted differently through her or his contact with multiple norms and other people, and the various identifications of a subject cannot be reduced to an identity. Cultural norms are lived as psychic reality in various ways. (Butler 1997.) Also, to work a name requires reiteration that initiates the possibility of failure. This question will be discussed in the next chapter.

In contrast, the Lacanian subject can be understood only in its relation to the topology of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The Other and others have a significant role in Lacanian thought, since the ego is formed in imaginary identifications with the other, and one becomes a subject in language only in relationship to the Other (the symbolic), but the real is the constitutive lack, the basis of both the subject and the desire. In Lacanian thought, the subject is the distance from identity provided by interpellation, that is she or he never occupies the name by which she or he is called. The subject is the void that precedes subjectification. (Žižek 2000, 104, 115–120.) Thus, the Lacanian

subject is based on the real, whereas Butler's subject is not split in the same manner, but is a subject of the Other, formed in its constant relationship to the symbolic norms and actual other people.

Contingency, Lacanian real and the constitutive outside in Butler's thought

What are the consequences of Butler's and Lacanian thought for thinking contingency and the political subject? Butler aims at theorising cultural power and the historical formation of norms and exclusions. She asks how the limits of what is understood as human are produced, and what kinds of identifications are made possible. Butler does not aim at formulating a theory of the human psyche as such. In her thought, cultural norms organize the intelligibility of identities, lives and desires. Norms create a domain of symbolic intelligibility, the speakable, by simultaneously excluding certain desires and lives into the area of unintelligibility. Even though Butler believes that psychoanalysis can be brought into a fertile dialogue with poststructuralism, she sees limitations in the way contingency is theorised by several thinkers inspired by psychoanalysis (Butler & Laclau & Žižek 2000).

The concept of the real highlights the tension between Butler's thought and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and this tension has been well articulated in the dialogues between Žižek and Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality – Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, co-authored by

Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Žižek (2000).³ Butler and Žižek both see failure as a condition of democratic contestation and they try to take into account what constitutes the resistance of democracy to the final realization, the failure of any claim to identity to achieve the final determination. However, they disagree on whether failure is a structural necessity or a failure on the level of discourses.

Interestingly, both Žižek and Butler are inspired by Hegel. Žižek's ontology can be characterized as a Lacanian reading of Hegel: that which exists is challenged by the structure's internal difference from itself, the real. Žižek credits Hegel as the theorist of antagonism, contingency and inner difference. According to him, Hegel does not search for the transcendent domain beyond the realm of opposites, but sees the gap in reality, reality's inherent contradiction, as a truth that does not need to be overcome. According to Žižek, Hegel needs Lacan because the Lacanian concept of the real explains the dynamics, the eternal movement, in Hegel's thought. (Žižek 1989, 7; 2006, 7, 18, 27.) For Butler, the incompleteness of subject formation is linked to the democratic contestation over signifiers. For her, Hegel illustrates the ceaseless movement of concepts and the refusal to establish the conditions for what is and can be. (Butler 2000a, 12, 23–24.) Thus, Butler and Žižek differ on how to conceptualize the resistance of democracy to the final realization.

Žižek criticizes Butler, firstly, because she does not make a distinction between the contingency of a certain historical horizon and the more fundamental foreclosure, that

grounds this very horizon. Žižek maintains that what is barred is not that which is excluded under some hegemonic regime. If we conflate the real of an antagonism with symbolic differences, as Butler does, then we regress to an empiricist problematic. (Žižek 2000a, 108, 111; Žižek 2000b, 216.) “[O]ne should distinguish between two levels: the hegemonic struggle for which a particular content will hegemonize the empty universal notion; and the more fundamental impossibility that renders the Universal empty, and thus a terrain for hegemonic struggle.” (Žižek 2000a, 111.) In other words, the claim is that Butler confuses two levels, the social and the structural. Butler's “real” is inhabited by the excluded and not-accepted, and it is possible to transform the real through political work. (see also Hekanaho 2008; Dean 2000, 210, 221.)

Secondly, according to Žižek, the Lacanian position enables a far more radical understanding of contingency than Butler's view. The Lacanian understanding of contingency is not based on the re-signification of the symbolic coordinates, but aims at transforming the very structuring principle of the symbolic order. The Lacanian notion of the act refers not to partial changes, but to the change of the structure itself. An ethical act does not occur within the given horizon of what appears to be possible, but it redefines the very form of what is possible. For Žižek, performative resignifications are not enough for explaining change, since resistance only works as a part of the same hegemonic game. (Žižek 2000a, 121; Žižek 2000b 220–221; see also Edelman 2004, 104–105.)

The Lacanian subject creates something new not by fulfilling her or his fantasies, but by facing the real. Refusing to participate in the existing symbolic order, and saying ‘no’ or ‘neither’ is the “politics” of the real. The real cannot offer articulations of possible futures, but it is the force of the unpredictable change and disturbing logic. Žižek explains that an ethical figure does not compromise her desire, but goes to the real core of it. In an ethical act, the subject makes the crazy and impossible choice of striking at himself. The authentic ethical act sacrifices the cause itself. Thus, an ethical act as a properly free act is unbearable and traumatic. It is not an intentional act, that is, what you choose to do, but something you must do. For Žižek, the symbolic gains its ultimate meaning in the empty content of the real, in the negative, in the absence of meaning. Thus, the meaning of a sacrifice is the sacrifice of meaning. (Žižek 2006, 83–85, 92–95, 334, 382; Zupančič 2000, 238, 244.)

Because resistance is part of the expected logic, sometimes the system is challenged most effectively by overidentifying with it:

In so far as power relies on its ‘inherent transgression’, then – sometimes at least – overidentifying with the explicit power discourse – ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises) – can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning (Žižek 2000b, 220).

Thus, according to Žižek, an ethical or real act refuses to work according to the expected logic, whereas But-

ler’s resistance is the necessary and expected part of the workings of the hegemony. Partial changes only feed the very machine they aim to contest. As an example of queer theory that builds on Lacanian thought, I draw attention to Lee Edelman’s book *No Future – Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelman’s thesis can be seen as a crazy or impossible act of striking at oneself in a Žižekian manner.⁴

Edelman works on queer theory, psychoanalytical theory and cultural studies. His polemical work outlines a radical ethics of queer theory. He asks if all political visions have to be visions about the future, and suggests that queers have to take on the burden of negativity. The value of queerness lies in its motivation to embrace the refusal of the social and political order. Edelman’s thought can be traced to Leo Bersani’s argument in *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (1988), according to which it may be “necessary to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality”. (Bersani 1988, 209; Dean 2007, 3.)

Edelman criticises Butler’s vision of politics and writes that she promises everyone access to a livable social norm, and believes naively in an ever-widening horizon of inclusiveness. He asks: how can the future be unpredicted if it is posited? We should insist on the unintelligible’s unintelligibility, since the symbolic can never master the real. Edelman situates his argument in the psychoanalytical discourse, and claims that politics, whether of the left or the right, are always politics of the signifier. Politics work in the area of the symbolic, in the register of the speaking

subject and the law, and therefore, politics is a form of fantasy that promises the stability of identities and subjects, and the coherence of the imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in a recognisable form. (Edelman 2004, 6–9, 104–107.)

What opposes the politics of the future is, according to Edelman, the figure of the queer. The “fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments” understood as destructive of meaning and therefore, responsible for the undoing of the social organization and inevitably life itself, is attached to the figure of the queer. Politics rests on figures, since they are essential to identity. Social relations are inscribed in figural relations. Thus, Edelman calls on queers, who practice non-normative sexualities, to embrace this figure of destruction and identify with it. (Edelman 2004, 13, 25–31.)

Edelman constructs the figure of a sinthomosexual that he connects with the queer, homosexuality and the death drive. The term sinthomosexual, or sinthomosexuality, combines the term homosexuality with Lacan’s term *sinthome*, which refers to a symptom that cannot be given a meaning. For Edelman, sinthomosexual’s *jouissance* is beyond the logic of fantasy and desire, since it connects to the death drive. Breaking the coherence, suspending the totality by irony expresses the presence of *jouissance* for the sinthomosexual. (Edelman 2004, 35, 89.) In short, Edelman posits the sinthomosexual as the symptom of the heterosexual symbolic. It is the point where the real breaks the coherent heterosexual system of meaning. For

Edelman, sinthomosexuality stands for the ethical act: “to embrace the impossibility, the inhumanity of the sinthomosexual: that, I suggest, is the ethical task for which queers are singled out” (Edelman 2004, 109).⁵

Thus, Edelman repeats stereotypes for a purpose: his thesis can be seen as an ethical act of striking at oneself in a Žižekian manner, overidentifying with the explicit power discourse. Edelman’s provocative statements can be understood as a reaction to the homophobia of the religious conservatives in the US, who see signs of the end of civilization in gay marriage. Instead of claiming that they are mistaken, he embraces their scenarios.

What Žižek and Edelman share is the critique of politics that aims at articulating better new futures. The symbolic structure is seen as a closed system by itself. The real order is the lack of the symbolic that enables it to change. Žižek claims that when we look at resistance from a different angle, it appears to be feeding the very same machine that it fights against. This happens with ecological, anti-racist, feminist and anti-globalist resistance, since the resistance they perform is part of the hegemonic system itself. Contrary to resistance, the real act is an ethical act and it cannot be articulated or planned beforehand, since it does not follow any rules or codes, but in itself establishes what is ethical. (Žižek 2006, 49, 75, 362.)

Like Žižek, Edelman also makes a clear distinction between a closed order and a change, since the heterosexual symbolic does not change by itself, but constantly repeats

itself. Thus, queers must not wait for the promised better future, since it never comes. Normalizing homosexuality into the heterosexual order will never happen, and according to Edelman, it should not even be hoped for. The only option for the queer is to forget the future and the articulation of better political systems. Queer is the other side of politics. (Edelman 2006, 6-13, 25-31, 74, 109.)

From a Butlerian perspective, Edelman's act of embracing the stereotypical figure of the queer seems problematic. Figures build social reality, and therefore it is essential to examine what consequences certain rhetorical gestures have. Edelman's portrayal of the queer and the sinthomosexual reaffirm the negative stereotypes of homosexuality problematically and render invisible the multiplicity of actual queer lives. The figure of the sinthomosexual that Edelman constructs rests on extremely binary thinking: the closed heterosexual reproductive symbolic that always produces the same structure is contrasted to the sinthomosexual anti-futurity. In this binary model, the future cannot be queer and the symbolic sphere is seen as a heterosexual monolithic whole.

Žižek's and Edelman's understanding of contingency describes a position where we afterwards recognize the acts that changed the symbolic. The change cannot be planned or articulated beforehand. Therefore, the "politics" of the real is not really politics in the sense of creating a planned strategy, but a process where the subject faces the real and the event is symbolised afterwards, and this enables change. Also, I suggest that Žižek's and Edelman's

thought shifts problematically between requests to "refuse to participate" or to rupture the system and the idea that you cannot decide to do an ethical act, as it is not an act of a conscious agent.

This differs from the idea of performativity. Butler refuses to theorize with the Lacanian topological model of the real and the symbolic. Instead, she follows Foucault by understanding reality as a multiple network of discourses and practices, where reiterating differently, consciously or not, can construct a new order. As the meaning of an act is formed in the complicated network of different social practices, the change is not a result of some structural necessity. Still, the meaning of an act cannot be guaranteed beforehand or be fully controlled by the subjects, and the same act can have different consequences and meanings depending on the context. Consequently, there are no practices or acts that could totally refuse to participate, as there are various systems of meanings at work simultaneously.

Butler criticizes Žižek for positing an ahistorical structure of the real and the symbolic. We cannot identify structures first, and then apply them to their examples. According to Butler, the Lacanian structure works as a tool that can be transposed from any and every context onto any and every object, and it operates as a theoretical fetish that renounces the conditions of its own emergence. What Žižek aims to do is to lay out the a priori conditions for political articulation itself. In his view, the ahistorical is at the heart of all historicity. (Butler 2000a, 26-27; Butler 2000c, 274-275.)

The idea of ahistorical psychic structures or ahistorical logical necessities is problematic from Butler's perspective, since she does not want to assume any structures that would be prior to the social. No a priori account is going to be adequate, since a priori as a heuristic point of departure will have to come under radical scrutiny, if it is not to function as a dogmatic moment of theory construction. The knowing subject cannot be understood as the one who imposes ready-made categories on a pre-given world. There is no way of dissociating the truth from the rhetoric, since the rhetoric also builds the truth that it claims to reveal. Truth is not separate from saying. Moreover, language will not only build the truth it conveys, but it will also convey a different truth from the one that was intended. (Butler 2000b, 127, 140; Butler 2000c, 269, 274–279.)

Thus, firstly, Butler claims that the discursive means by which subjects are ordered fail, because discourse has more aims and effects than those that are actually intended by its users. We do not need the concept of the real to explain contingency. The theory of performativity emphasizes the way in which a social world is made, and new social possibilities emerge, at various levels of social action through relations of power. (Butler 2000a, 14; Butler 2000b, 158, 161.)

Secondly, the idea of particular changes versus a radical change is too binary a division. When Žižek claims that Butler is caught in the game of the power that she opposes, he does not consider that for Butler, such complicity is the condition of agency rather than its destruction

(Butler 2000c, 277). “To make a claim is not necessarily to extend an old logic or to enter into a mechanism by which the claimant is assimilated into the existing regime.” Instead of assimilation, claims can restage a set of cultural norms by showing the limits of the existing discourses (like women's human rights or gay and lesbian human rights expose the limits of the existing notion of human). (Butler 2000a, 39–41.)

The theorisation of unpredictable change can be built in other ways than by emphasizing the real, and focusing on language or on the actions of the subjects does not necessarily lead into a situation where changes are understood to be predictable. The unconscious or opacity of a subject factors in Butler's thought, but it is not the source of radical change. The opacity of a subject does not prevent her or him from thinking and planning politics, but the ethical relation to others rises from one's understanding of one's own position as an opaque and vulnerable agent (see Butler 2005). Also, a vision of the future does not have to be built on the idea of a general human being, but when creating visions, we can admit that there will be several of them, and that the goal is to create changes and shifts towards the better for a variety of people with varying views of what that better would be. The point of democracy is precisely the ideal of a possibility that exceeds every attempt at a final realization (Butler 2000b, 162).

Conclusion

In this article I have focused on the relationship of Butler's thought to that of Edelman and Žižek, and showed that Butler's thought is incompatible with the new Lacanian theory in several ways. Firstly, I suggest that Butler's thinking differs from Lacanian thought in its philosophical attitude: where the Lacanian thought relies on the topology of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, Butler refuses to theorize with theoretical systems. This can be seen, for example, in the tentative way Butler outlines the unconscious or opacity in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. The non-foundational thinking of Butler can be traced back to her Hegelian influences.

The synthesis Butler creates is both the promise and the difficulty of her thought, since by producing new challenging combinations, she also obscures the meaning of the concepts she borrows. For example, the concepts of *subject* (Pulkkinen 2007), *ego*, *psyche*, *self* or *desire* are not defined clearly, but their meanings slide in the text, and they often seem obscure and misunderstood when considered from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Secondly, I proposed that it is important to explicate the consequences of different theoretical traditions for thinking contingency. The central difference between Butler and the Lacanians is that there is no real in Butler's thought, and she deliberately refuses to posit a formal source of change. In Butler's thought, the exclusions are concrete, historical and related to the existing norms: there are

lives and desires that are rendered unintelligible. Butler sees reality as a multiple network of discourses and practices where reiterating differently, consciously or not, can construct a new order. In the Lacanian thought of Žižek and Edelman, change cannot be planned or articulated beforehand, but the subject challenges the existing structures by performing the impossible act. Žižek's description of the mad choice of striking at oneself is exemplified by Edelman's position, where embracing the figure of the destructive queer is seen to rupture the coherent meaning. I suggest that instead of starting a new beginning, this act may sustain the existing structure, since these stereotypical figures work performatively, build social realities and affect attitudes, practices and laws. Edelman's portrayal of the figures of the queer and the sinthomosexual reaffirm stereotypes of homosexuality problematically and render invisible the multiplicity of actual queer lives.

Notes

¹ See Hekanaho 2008.

² There are important Lacanian political philosophers, whose theorising of social change differs from that of Žižek and Edelman, and seems more promising than Žižek's and Edelman's views. Žižek and Edelman deny the possibility of articulating a positive political order, whereas Ernesto Laclau and Alain Badiou pay attention to the question of how to institute continuous negotiation and a permanent democratic revolution after an event. (See Stavrakakis

2007, 141, 156–157.) However, this article focuses on contrasting Butler’s thought to that of Žižek and Edelman.

³ The important discussions on sexual difference and on capitalism between Žižek and Butler are outside the scope of this article.

⁴ Differences in the thought of Žižek and Edelman are not discussed in the scope of this article.

⁵ Edelman’s argument is problematic from the psycho-analytical perspective. You cannot identify with the drive, because the real and the drive do not work on the level of a conscious ego. Also, if destruction starts to function as a cause of desire, we are going further from the real and from the drive to the area of desire. (See Zupančič 2000, 44, 237; Dean 2007.)

References

- Bersani**, Leo 1988: Is the Rectum a Grave? In Douglas Crimp (ed.): *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 197–222.
- Butler**, Judith 1997: *The Psychic Life of Power – Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press.
- Butler** Judith 2005: *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler**, Judith 2000a: Restating the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism. In Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žizek (eds): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 11–43.
- Butler**, Judith 2000b: Competing Universalities. In Judith Butler & Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žizek (eds): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 136–181.
- Butler**, Judith 2000c: Dynamic Conclusions. In Judith Butler & Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žizek (eds): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 263–280.
- Dean**, Tim 2000: *Beyond Sexuality*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dean**, Tim 2007: An Impossible Embrace: Queerness, Futurity, and the Death Drive. Forthcoming.
- Edelman**, Lee 2004: *No Future – Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Fink**, Bruce 1995 *The Lacanian Subject – Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton University Press.
- Hekanaho**, Pia Livia 2008: Performatiivinen suku-puolenteoria, sukupuoliero ja sukupuolittamisen kaavat: Minne Judy hukikasi reaalisen? [Performativity, Sexual Difference and the Formulas of Sexuation]. In Marianne Liljeström, Marja Kaskisaari, Anna Hänninen (eds): *Performatiivisuuden politiikat* [The Politics of Performativity]. Tampere Vastapaino. Forthcoming 2008.

Pulkkinen, Tuija 2007: Differing Spirits – Reflections of Hegelian "Subjects" within Contemporary Feminist Theory. Paper given at the PPhiG Symposium 'Hegel und Geschlecht'. Finnland Institut in Deutschland, Berlin. March 30–31st 2007. Mimeo.

Stavrakakis, Yannis 2007: *The Lacanian Left – Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics*. State University of New York Press.

Žižek, Slavoj 1989: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London & New York: Verso.

Žižek, Slavoj 2000a: Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please! In Judith Butler & Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Zizek (eds): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 90–135.

Žižek, Slavoj 2000b: *Da capo senza Fine*. In Judith Butler & Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Zizek (eds): *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London: Verso, 213–262.

Žižek, Slavoj 2006: *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Zupančič, Alenka 2000: *Ethics of the Real*. London & New York: Verso.