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Gender Phantasms in New Authoritarian Times

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SEMINAR REPORT

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In a lecture that combined rigorous analysis with a compelling call to action, Judith Butler delivered a passionate critique of new rising forms of authoritarianism, focusing on how "gender phantasms" are mobilized to incite fear and consolidate political power in the present conjuncture. In their lecture, Butler referred particularly, though not exclusively, to the United States. The lecture drew on and extended the argument of Butler's recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024), in which the transnational "anti-gender ideology movement" is analyzed as a key vehicle of contemporary authoritarianism.

Butler began by acknowledging the global implications of U.S. politics, despite a general principle of avoiding U.S.-centrism in international talks. Given today's dense global interconnections, what happens in the United States reverberates well beyond its borders, with consequences for both democracy and authoritarian regimes elsewhere.

Butler introduced the argument by recalling the pro-Palestinian protests that took place at Columbia University and the pressure subsequently placed on the university to suppress protest among members of its own community. Butler emphasized how, under such pressure, the university risks becoming an instrument of government for the curtailment of basic rights, rather than a site of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Butler then described the climate of fear and disillusionment among young people following events such as Trump's election, the rollback of basic human rights, especially those of trans people, the climate crisis, and the deportation of migrants. These developments, Butler argued, represent a broader erosion of democracy, an attack on the Constitution and on human dignity, compounded by digital surveillance and targeted propaganda.

Central to the talk was the concept of "gender ideology" as a politically manufactured threat - what Butler, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, called a *phantasm* - and the way "anti-gender" ideology develops within, and reinforces, authoritarian structures of control. A phantasm, in Butler's account, is not a simple falsehood that facts alone could dispel: it is a structured scene that condenses heterogeneous anxieties - about economic precarity, national identity, sexuality, and the family - and gives them a single, fearsome object. "Gender" thus comes to function as a catch-all target onto which fears generated by social and economic transformation are displaced.

Butler explored how such phantasms are circulated digitally to incite fear, distort public perception, and justify oppressive policies, thereby reshaping how people think and see the world. One example used to illustrate a phantasm was the false claim that former Vice President Kamala Harris supported sex reassignment surgery for migrants. The claim was deployed by right wing movements at a pivotal moment of the last U.S. presidential campaign to intensify anxieties about, and rejection of, trans and migrant communities; to conjure an imagined "new left order" against which to mobilize; and, above all, to convert people's fear into popular support for

an authoritarian leader. To understand the election results, however, Butler suggested inquiring into what gripped people at the level of fear and desire through a **psychosocial framework** that is also historically situated, rather than treating voters as merely misinformed.

Butler cautioned against underestimating the power of digital platforms, which operate not only as tools of surveillance and control but as constructors of social consensus. Authoritarian regimes, Butler argued, use these platforms to normalize harm and to recast repression as moral restoration. The digital realm thus becomes a space where "fascist passions"—above all the enjoyment taken in stripping others of their rights—are publicly displayed and rewarded. Butler therefore urged the audience to regard democracy as fragile and continuously under threat, especially where basic rights can be so easily suspended, and to recognize that it exists only because people actively fight to preserve it every day. This means that we can indeed lose democracy, and with it the world as we know it; yet other societies have already lived through such losses—Brazil being one example—and out of that experience new ways of thinking about cohabitation have emerged. This practice of imaginative creation is closely bound up with people's psychic lives, but also with concrete socio-political conditions. The right wing, for its part, uses digital platforms to promote its own imaginary and to expand its consensus, reconfiguring social and economic power through the control of those very platforms, what Butler called **digital capitalism**. By these means, the right can shape how algorithms operate and normalize forms of racism, sadism, and a resurgent patriarchy.

All of this contributes to the construction of a "phantasmatic scene": it organizes people's sense of the world and helps explain how that world holds together. Butler highlighted the intersection of conditions and situations that at first appear unconnected: the stripping of trans rights, the deportation of migrants, the criminalization of efforts to rescue migrants at sea, and climate destruction. These are different modalities of violence and governmental regulation, and all of them feed the "fascist passions".

A fascist passion takes the form of a **moralized sadism**: destructive forms of life, unchecked violence, negligence, and the stripping of rights are sustained by a justificatory scheme built on moral conviction and experienced as morality itself. It is fed by a continuous desire for violence that never finds satisfaction. Vulnerable communities thus become the preferred targets of attack, the perfect scapegoats, and everything is justified by the moral intention of restoring the good life and a great social order. To realize this goal, stripping people of their rights comes to seem necessary. Through a continuous work of renaming, doing damage is no longer "damage": it becomes "doing good". Here Butler's analysis resonates with the account of differential grievability developed in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009): some lives are framed as fully livable and worthy of mourning, while others are rendered ungrievable, and therefore available for injury without moral cost.

Butler pointed to a further feature of fascism: the character of its leaders' public speech. The discourse of these politicians, Butler argued, is untethered from truth, rich in hyperbole and falsehood, and systematically concealing facts.

Having characterized the fascist passion, Butler suggested how to identify and oppose it. Above all, Butler emphasized the importance of envisioning and embodying alternative "counter-imaginaries": visions of justice and equality built through sustained practices of preservation, regeneration, and symbolic

engagement. Butler called for a transnational collective response capable of countering these passions and the violence inherent in them, and of designing a different kind of world - centered on care, interdependency, and **equal grievability**, - extended to human and animal life and to the living processes of the earth. In this respect, the lecture carried forward the ethics of nonviolence and radical interdependency that Butler has elaborated in *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

Butler urged the audience to consider which principles we want to see embodied in a desirable world, like freedom, equality, justice, and nonviolence. These principles are not realizable without first imagining the world that would embody them, and then carrying them into political discourse, political action, and institutions.

Butler also warned about the distinctive character of the new authoritarian fascism: it operates through democratic structures, such as elections and voting, and yet aims at the destruction of democracy itself, attacking its basic precepts - including constitutionalism and the separation of powers - in order to restore a conservative world. Fascists enter democratic institutions, monopolize them, and finally destroy them. It may seem a paradox, but the destruction of democracy can happen under its own name.

Butler concluded by stressing the urgency of constructing new politics of shelter and care, asking how a living interdependency can survive amidst escalating fascist passions. Butler advocated finding and harnessing one's rage, and deploying digital resistance and collective imagination as essential tools for confronting authoritarianism and reclaiming the principles of shared life and justice.