



Kinship That Matters

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review of:

Judith Butler (2000) *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press. (HB: pp. 103, £14.50, ISBN: 0-231-11894-5)

Reading Judith Butler's work has always been challenging for me but *Antigone's Claim* proved particularly tricky. Unlike the texts of hers which I have consulted in the past, it deals with unfamiliar subject matter, not least a Sophocles play which I have never seen performed nor read myself, indeed one of whose existence I remained cheerfully ignorant until starting to read this book. Then there is the literature to which Butler refers – Hegel, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss and Irigaray in the main – some of which I have a glancing familiarity with, but much I do not know at all. Moreover, at times I found the argument somewhat fragmented or difficult to follow – it was not always clear how Butler had moved from one point to another and there is also a fair amount of repetition.

Then again, having established my radical unsuitability as a reviewer of this highly complex book, what I (think I) understood of it was both useful and insightful, especially the points at which the argument is grounded by reference to empirical example. Butler begins by telling us that she initially turned to Antigone, whom she analyses here solely in terms of her appearance in three of Sophocles' plays (*Antigone* in the main, but also *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*), because of her belief that Antigone might potentially serve as a figure of feminist resistance to the State, standing as she is often taken to do for kinship and the sphere of the family. Thus she is perhaps significant, Butler remarks, as a putative anti-authoritarian counter to "contemporary efforts to recast political opposition as legal plaint and to seek the legitimacy of the state in the espousal of feminist claims" (p.1).

However, it quickly becomes apparent that the argument here is to develop in a very different direction. That is to say, Butler in fact takes issue with the various influential arguments – Lacanian psychoanalysis most particularly – which position Antigone on the side of the pre-social and pre-political, on the side of kinship and the incest taboo. It

is kinship – in the sense that “a mother is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations, a mother is someone who only has sexual relations with the father, etc.” (p.18) – that Lacan identifies as enabling language (‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’, ‘they’ etc.), signification (each term only has meaning in relation to other terms) and therefore cultural intelligibility. Thus he casts it as the very precondition of an orderly and psychically healthy social domain, in which certain relationships (and not others) are possible, liveable and understandable, in which certain relationships ‘matter’. Antigone, then, exists outside of the *polis*, but the *polis* could not exist without her – it is the kinship relations that she symbolizes which make the *polis* possible. So we meet our first stumbling block in terms of the claim that Antigone somehow stands, irrevocably and unambiguously, for kinship – as Butler points out, “every interpretive effort to cast a character [in the play] as a representative of kinship or the state tends to falter and lose coherence and stability” because of the apparently “essential relationship” between the two domains (p.5).

It might be useful at this point for readers who, like me, are not familiar with *Antigone* to provide a crude summary of the play. Antigone is the daughter of the incestuous marriage between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta, as documented by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. One of her brothers, Polyneices, has led an army against the Theban regime of a second brother, Eteocles, in order to reclaim what he feels is his rightful heritage. Both are killed in the ensuing conflict. The King of Thebes, Creon (also Antigone’s uncle), decrees that Eteocles is entitled to full burial rites as a war hero but that Polyneices as a traitor against the kingdom is not to be accorded a proper funeral – “indeed, [he] wants the body left bare, dishonored and ravaged” (p.7). Antigone defies Creon by insisting on burying Polyneices, but when her crime is discovered he sentences her to death by starvation. The story then becomes yet more unremittingly tragic as Creon’s son Haemon, to whom Antigone has been promised in marriage, realizes what his father has done and takes his own life. Eurydice, Creon’s wife, then repeats her son’s actions and the play closes with Creon asking likewise to be put to death, as he has effectively murdered his wife and his son.

What this very brief outline does not reveal, however, is that Antigone is a profoundly ambiguous character. Apart from the aforementioned argument that kinship stands in much of the existing analysis of the play as the conditions of possibility of a social domain, as Butler suggests she is also difficult to claim as a pure symbol of kinship because she is first and foremost the offspring of an incestuous bond such that her father is her half-brother, and she is also in love with Polyneices. And, if kinship is taken as structuring gender relations, Antigone is said to assume ‘manly’ qualities not least in her verbally defiant interaction with Creon – indeed to ‘unman’ him. Likewise, she seems to step into the place previously occupied by Polyneices in her defiance of Creon, which “situates her as the one who may substitute for [Polyneices] and, hence, replaces and territorializes him. She assumes manhood through vanquishing manhood, but she vanquishes it only by idealizing it” (p.11). Moreover, Antigone resists Creon in language which is borrowed from the very sphere he is said to represent, that of the universal authority of the state: “Her agency emerges precisely through her refusal to honor his command, and yet the language of this refusal assimilates the very terms of the sovereignty that she refuses. He expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech act by asserting her own

sovereignty” (p.11). It is also true to say that Antigone’s original crime is in itself scarcely representative of “the sanctity of kinship, for[, although] it is for her brother or, at least, in his name, that she is willing to defy the law”, she is categorical on the point that she would not have done this for other members of her family, her future children or husband, say (pp.9-10). On the other hand, this can also be interpreted (and Butler does so later), as Antigone condensing her grief for the many dead or rejected members of her family into the figure of Polyneices – here again we see kinship positions sliding into each other. Finally, her very name can be translated as anti-kinship/family/generation (*gonē* in the original Greek).

Butler employs this ambiguity in Antigone’s character to subsequently pursue the theme which ties the text together – the question of whether the symbolic power of kinship, of the Law-of-the-Father (Lacan, 1979), of the mommy-daddy-me triangle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), is in fact culturally universal, immutable and indisputable, such that only certain forms of kinship have ever ‘mattered’ and will ever ‘matter’. Alternatively, is it possible to conceive of the many emergent forms of relationship between parents and children and indeed non-blood relations in these times of divorce, remarriage, exile, migration, displacement, multiple or single parenting, step-, gay and ‘blended’ families as equally if not more legitimate, healthy and functional types of kinship without recourse to conventional family structures? For structural psychoanalysis, the answer is a definitive no – because “[t]he symbolic is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the oedipal scene” (p.20). In other words, if, for example, there are two men or two women parenting children, this then implies that “some primary division of gendered roles organizes their psychic places within the scene, so that the empirical contingency of two same-gendered parents is nevertheless straightened out by the presocial psychic place of the Mother and Father into which they enter” (p.69). Psychoanalytic theory has also been employed to argue against gay marriage, gay adoption and lesbian parenting lest this fails to happen – to the extent that this last has been predicted to contribute to autism in children because of the “paternal gap” it entails (p.70). But Butler errs in the opposite direction. Although she never answers the question she poses herself – whether the *morés* that control (il)legitimate forms of kinship may be substantially and significantly altered – she raises it as a possibility on the basis of the uncertainties and elisions represented by the fictional Antigone, a figure so closely allied with classic kinship patterns and yet simultaneously destabilizing of them in other ways. Thus Antigone, like the new forms of kinship to which Butler alludes, is unthinkable without a degree of horror under conditions of cultural intelligibility which rely on the resolution of the oedipal drama. Antigone therefore permits us, so Butler argues, to ask which kinship arrangements should be seen as legitimate, because she refuses to acknowledge any law that does not acknowledge her love for Polyneices and her grief at his death – she lives “the equivocations that unravel the purity and universality of those structuralist rules” (p.18). Apart from anything else, as Butler’s Foucauldian formula also asserts, the taboo on sexual relations with the closest members of one’s family always and already (re)produces the Other of incest itself “as a necessary specter of social dissolution, a specter without which social bonds cannot emerge” (p.67). It is much more than simply prohibitive – and what is significant here is that the incestuous ‘perversity’ which the law of kinship necessarily gives rise to appears in the play itself

in the language of precisely that law “and makes its claim ... in the sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization” (p.68).

Another important argument which Butler offers here is her suggestion that psychoanalysis itself tends to the tautological in its insistence on the law of kinship. She suggests that the very claim that this is immutable, incontestable and indisputable is a reifying claim, in the sense that those who adhere to the law in this way wish to ensure “a limit to the social, the subversive, the possibility of agency and change, a limit that we cling to, symptomatically, as the final defeat of our own power”. In taking the law as universal, these theorists, she asserts, attribute “the very force to the law that the law itself is said to exercise” (p.21). Thus, she implies, it is a moot point as to whether it is the law itself, or the power it has been discursively constructed as possessing, that so thoroughly and seemingly irremediably informs our kinship structures and thus our social practices. In other words, “does the structuralist law report on the curse that is upon kinship or does it deliver that curse?” (p.66).

For Butler, then, kinship, like gender and sex as discussed in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), “secures the conditions of intelligibility by which life becomes livable, [but] by which life also becomes condemned and foreclosed” (p.23). She therefore wishes to challenge the relationship between kinship and “reigning epistemes of cultural intelligibility”, in defiance of those who “seek to make normative versions of kinship essential to the working of culture and the logic of things ... who, from terror, savor the final authority of those taboos that stabilize social structure as timeless truth, without then ever asking, what happened to the heirs of Oedipus?” (p.24-25). Butler refuses the Lacanian analysis of Antigone that has her dying purely because her desire for her brother is symbolically insupportable within kinship, preferring instead to ask how and in what ways her story allows us to rethink the very terms of ‘liveability’. She ends, provocatively and importantly, by suggesting that, if kinship is “the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human...the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws” (p.82).

In terms of what all of this means for those of us engaged in the study of organization, it is my contention that Butler’s argument allows for a reappraisal of kinship (as well as sex and gender) as a pervasive system (or organization) within which roles, behaviours, relationships and desires are included/excluded, ordered and circumscribed. Moving away from the Lacanian assumption that oedipal kinship structures are and indeed must be culturally universal also entails considering what might come to stand in their place, or at least to complement them: in other words, what new forms of kinship organization (including those where no blood ties are involved) might then become liveable, functional, possible? Antigone’s ‘excesses’ in this regard both mirror and foreshadow the ‘excesses’ of the non-traditional kinship network: they point to the reasons why,

despite [US] government efforts to label fatherless families as dysfunctional, those black urban kinship arrangements constituted by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends who work together to raise children and reproduce the material conditions of life are extremely functional and would be seriously misdescribed if measured against an Anglo-American standard of familial normalcy. (p.73, following Carol Stack)

In addition, and although I have to admit to being particularly drawn to the discussion of forms of organization beyond the production of goods and services, outside the sphere of employment/education/government, to discussion which allows insights from organization studies to inform other disciplines as opposed to the reverse scenario necessarily or always being the case, it is also true to say that a reconsideration and critique of this kind potentially has much to offer the study of organizations in the more conventional sense. The analysis of gender and sex in this context might very well be served in an interesting and fruitful way by, for example, reading the drama which unfolds in *Antigone* as if it were set in a contemporary workplace – imagining Creon as autocratic (father-)manager, Antigone as defiant employee, Polyneices and Eteocles as members of warring organizational factions, in conflict over organizational territory, conflating the incest in the story with nepotism or sexual favouritism, foregrounding the trope of family in organizational relations and so on.

Consequently, although *Antigone's Claim* is frustrating and impenetrable at times, and despite the fact that it raises many more questions than it answers, it serves eventually to open up the kind of critical space with which we are familiar from Butler's other work. The text therefore provides an important resource by which to begin to think through what kinship (and other forms of organization), freed from the oedipal stranglehold, might potentially come to mean in the twenty-first century.

references

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