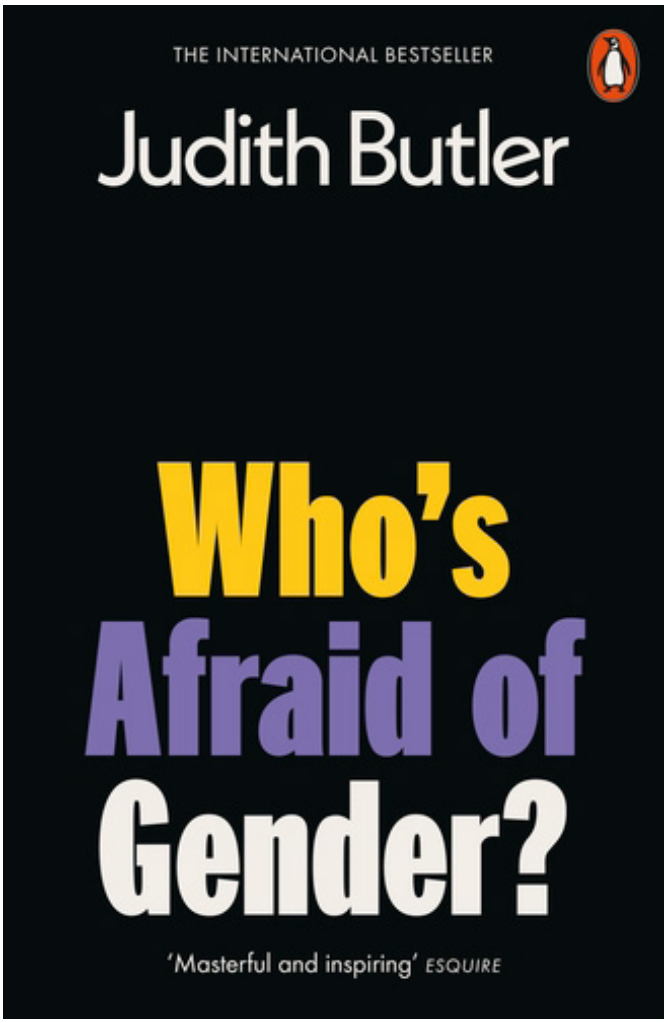

Book Review: Who's Afraid Of Gender

Judith Butler, Allen Lane, 2024, 308pp, ISBN 9780241595824, £25.00 (hardback).

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Following the sexual optimism of the late 1990's and early 2000's, a time when, as Paris Lees puts it, you could "wear what you want, be who you want, shag who you want," the last two decades have been less than optimistic (Lees & Welsh, 2025). There has been a gradual, but accelerating rise of homophobia, transphobia and misogyny, both culturally and legally; a trend that is synchronised with a broader rise of conservative, authoritarian, and fascist movements across the world. Whilst Judith Butler's earlier work in the nineties and noughties may have been written in a context of increased politico-legal protection, and thus functioning to establish and solidify the position of feminist and queer theory in the academy, the rising urgency for resisting political violence against gendered and sexed minorities has led to an increasing political intensity in their work; this political intensity culminating in the 2024 monograph, *Who's Afraid Of Gender.*

A year on from its release, Judith Butler's titular question is no less pertinent. This March Orbán's Hungary (unsuccessfully) banned pride events, in May the UK Supreme Court ruled on the definition of a woman through obscure biological-reductionism, and throughout 2025 we have seen a flurry of "anti-gender" executive orders from President Trump. It is in the context of these intensifying global attacks on gender theory, feminism, and trans rights that Butler gives an account of how the concept of "gender" has come to occupy such a complex space in contemporary debate. For instance, that within the frame of "anti-gender" movements, gender has come to represent sexual anarchy yet also totalitarian erasure of tradition; or Marxism yet also capitalism; or how in the OECD, gender can be a threat to "Western" values, but in most of the world, it can be seen as a tool of European imperialism.

Recognising this complexity Butler deploys Jean Laplanche's concept of the "phantasm" as the central concept of the book in order to give an account of how these contradictory and disparate signifiers can be "arbitrarily connected" (p. 12), but also to conceive of how minority persons and groups can come to represent a diffuse range of social ills – social ills to which those minorities may be the very targets of. The core thesis of the book which follows from this analysis is a call to action for a feminist and queer politics which is not limited to the sphere of individual rights, but which connects all struggles for social and economic justice to one another and seeks to build large coalitions of people. Coalitions of people who may not be comfortable together nor even like one another, but whose solidarity and partnership are necessary in building transna-

tional struggles for justice.

A key strength in communicating this coalitional message is the distinct accessibility of the book. Butler is an author who has been more than critiqued for obscurantism, their prose often leading to persistent misreadings of their work. Here however, the book in some regards stands as a summary of their oeuvre redacted of philosophical minutiae; in handfuls of sentences their philosophical concepts (such as "iteration," "framing," and "liveability") and scholarly influences and interlocutors (such as Andrea Dworkin, Jack Halberstam, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) are simplified and introduced to a lay audience. As Butler said in a March 2025 interview for PoliticsJOE, their new role seems to be "mak[ing] nerdy available".

A consequence, and potential critique, of the book follows this accessibility: that there is an occasional tendency to gloss over key terms without even mentioning, let alone analysing, their contested readings in critical theory. However, as this brevity was necessary for the book's accessibility, and the accessibility in turn serves its political efficacy, this critique is quite limited. Furthermore, as someone writing from a gender studies department at a less than accessible university, my ability to judge its readability to a lay audience should be taken cautiously; this is further evident in some non-academic reviews labelling the book "opaque" (Loffhagen 2024).

However, another limitation of the book is that although it calls for coalitions between differently violated bodies, the analysis is primarily directed at the phantasm of gender, at signification and psycho-social displacement. This leads to an occasional failing to properly consider the violations which led to the phantasm; although the deterioration of living standards is mentioned (primarily in the conclusion), a more developed analysis of how capital, austerity, and/or neoliberal governmentality produces the conditions of precarity that allow the phantasm to be operable may have proved effective in emphasising the commonalities such a coalition would be reliant upon, making the call for such a coalition stronger.

A final issue is that although Butler asserts that the book "cannot be fully global in its reach," (p. 64) the tendency to refer to "the anti-gender movement" without geo-political hedging can at times come across as universalising, risking re-inscribing the very epistemological Eurocentrism and monolingual obstinacy (p. 238) which their calls for anti-imperial, anti-universalising coalitions aim to contest.

These critiques aside, the book's role as an accessible polemic addressing the political urgency of gender studies, and its wider call to protect and foster critical democratic thinking, remains deeply relevant. In the months since publication, "gender," along with critical race theory, decolonial theory, and similar academic fields have only continued intensifying as phantasms. Today, not only are particular fields of study under threat, but – as Butler makes clear throughout the book – study itself is under threat. Reading, critical thought, artistic expression, and the university are all increasingly becoming that to which social ills are displaced; as Butler says: "thought itself [is framed as] a danger to society." (p. 23)

Quoting his father, New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani recently opined that "when the right gains power, the left writes a great book" (Mamdani 2025). Butler's 264 page call to preserve democratic thinking in the face of authoritarian populism may hold this snarky statement true, but we should take heed of Butler's notion that reading is "a precondition of democratic life," and recognise that the American President and the Vatican and whoever else censor for a reason: because it is necessary in the establishment of their own hegemony through erasing complexity and the ability for transformational thought. *Who's Afraid Of Gender,* in its accessibility, its political imperative, and its inadvertent function as an introduction to both gender studies, and to critical theory more broadly, will make the book essential in instigating, preserving, and fostering critical thought in the uncertain years ahead.

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