Judith BUTLER, *Who's afraid of gender?* (London, Penguin, 2024, 307 p.)

I suspect that Judith Butler had Edward Albee's play in mind when they chose the title of their latest book, *Who's afraid of gender?*

Albee's *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was probably named after the popular song, *Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?*, which the three little pigs sing in Walt Disney's 1933 famous cartoon. "The song," writes Alison Hopwood, "is equivalent to whistling to keep your courage up, defying what you fear" [Hopwood 1978: 101].[1] Substituting the big bad wolf with the feminist writer Virginia Woolf, Albee made the latter a representative of a "big bad (female) wolf," namely an independent woman who wants to emasculate men and complicate the binary world of patriarchy, where things are fixed and simple—good vs evil, order vs chaos, ruling males vs subaltern females.

Like the big bad wolf and Virginia Wolf, gender too—in Butler's story—is the personification of all that is unsettling and scary in today's world. Gender has in fact become a phantasm, a ghost. And like a truly sinister ghost, gender is represented by its detractors as having "destructive powers" [5], "a threat to children, national security", "heterosexual marriage and the normative family but also as a plot by elites to impose their cultural values on 'real people', a scheme for colonizing the Global South by urban centers of the Global North" [4]. In short, gender is the contemporary phantasm that collects and escalates "multitudes of modern panics" [5]. The latter is Butler's key thesis throughout the book. In a historical moment in which hope has vanished and despair for the future reigns at all levels—ecological, social and financial—the far-right in particular has managed to displace and condense very real (and very comprehensible) fears into a phantom called gender. Butler here borrows from French psychoanalyst Jean Laplance and his concept of the "phantasmatic scene". The latter is adapted and used by Butler to decipher the anti-gender movement, and the way it deploys gender, as a syntax enabling the organisation of many different elements of our psychosocial life into one seemingly coherent grammar.

[1] Alison HOPWOOD, 1978. "Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Alison Hopwood," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender* [https://atlantisjournal.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/download/5279/4441].

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Sara R. FARRIS, Goldsmiths University of London Email: s.farris@gold.ac.uk.

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The world over, from Brazil, Argentina, to Uganda, the United States, and all across Europe, far-right political organisations, Christian groups and the Vatican, but also some feminists, identify gender and what they call gender-theory as the unsettling terror that threatens all that is allegedly pure, orderly and "natural" in life. Over nearly 300 pages, Judith Butler thus takes us through a journey of discovery of the myriad organisations and public individuals fighting the enemy "gender" in the attempt to restore, or affirm the "proper" (and binary) order of things. In this spirit, Chapters 1-5 are devoted to analysing in detail who precisely these anti-gender organisations and individuals are, and how they have framed gender-theory as a quintessential evil of our times. In Chapter 1, entitled "the Global Scene," Butler reconstructs the central role played by Catholic hierarchies, particularly Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict) in sounding the alarm against gender, which Ratzinger had already in the 1990s taken to stand for the theory of homosexuality. In this chapter, Butler devotes significant space to discussing the anti-gay law passed in Uganda in 2023, which punishes "sodomy" with the death penalty. While the Vatican's homophobic propaganda has certainly had enormous influence on anti-gay legislation in the country, it is only through recourse to "economic and colonial history" that one can make full sense of its harshness. In Uganda "churches have emerged as the institutions primarily responsible for covering the social services that increasingly neoliberal and cash-poor governments have withdrawn. The church provides for basic needs and, in doing so, reorganizes how sexuality and gender are to be understood, imposing certain values and creating certain terrifying specters" [58].

Chapter 2 delves into the more recent iterations of anti-gender slurs within the Vatican's ranks, and by Pope Francis especially, which have contributed to disseminating gender-phobia in many different countries. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the rise of the far-right and its religious affiliations in the United States, particularly under Trump. At this stage, we could be tempted to think of the global anti-gender movement as fundamentally driven by conservative religious groups. That view is muddled in Chapter 5, which Butler devotes to analysing the TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminists) phenomenon in Britain. "The emergence of feminists who oppose 'gender'—Butler writes—has complicated any effort" to adopt a religious key to understanding the anti-gender bloc. Indeed "critical-gender" feminism in the United Kingdom brings together an array of women from different, and even opposite, political affiliations, from right to left. These feminists are somewhat united under the banner of a critique of patriarchy that, according to Butler, is outdated

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and misleading both in its analysis of the male sex as the "main enemy" of women, and in its mishandling of the purpose of critique itself.

In my view this is one of the best chapters of the book, where Butler is clearly at pains to reconcile how someone calling themselves a feminist is unable to recognise that (a) trans-women are the first to "dislike" the male lifeworld for that matter, given that they would rather identify as women; (b) affirming some sort of fixity of sex is essentialist; and (c) crucially, choosing to publicly attack trans-women/trans-gender people in a context in which the latter risk their lives daily due to intense transphobia, allies them with the most bigoted and dangerous fringes of the far-right. Chapters 6 to 10, finally, try to elaborate not so much a theory of what gender really is—an impossible and pointless task according to Butler—but rather to succinctly reconstruct a debate spanning decades that has engaged scientists and medical doctors as much as philosophers. And this debate points to the idea that gender and sex, nature and culture, are in fact a co-construction rather than a distinct dichotomy of sorts.

Ultimately, Butler's decision not to call gender an empty signifier, but rather a fantasy overdetermined with the fears of the geo-political and social context in which it is evoked—given that the anti-gender movement is indeed a very global phenomenon—is an astute and important one. That is because the fears that gender elicit are not the same in the United States as they are in Eastern Europe. In the latter for instance, the far-right attacks gender as the representative of neoliberal individualism, which is deemed responsible for dismantling the social services that former Soviet states enjoyed (contradictorily) outside the family unit. As "the family becomes all the more important [...] as the proxy social state" [258], Butler writes, Eastern European far-right forces manage to identify gender theory as that which imperils the last bastion of some form of safety-net.

We have a lucid and rather accessible Judith Butler here, one less interested in providing definitive conceptual definitions, and more concerned instead with understanding how we can "possibly counter a phantasm of this size and intensity before it moves even closer to eradicating" fundamental conquests of the last two centuries, including sexual, reproductive and social equalities and justice.

SARA R. FARRIS

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