

Competing Universalities and the Politics of Translation

The Idea of the Common in Judith Butler

In my paper, I discuss Judith Butler's critique of universalism in regard of its meaning for a contemporary theory of the common. In an inspiring exchange with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek ("Contingency, Hegemony, Universality", Verso 2000), but also in a couple of other interventions, Butler develops a new notion of global community which consists in two basic claims: 1. the common of humanity is not a container to which excluded groups simply have to gain access to, 2. nor are communities distinct separate entities that from time to time "clash" (as Samuel Huntington supposed with his infamous expression of a "clash of civilizations"). With her notion of "competing universalities", Butler offers a third way between cultural imperialism and relativism, since it enables us to think of the common as the result of a multiple and heterogeneous process of construction. Emancipatory politics can thus neither be understood as the mere inclusion of excluded groups into a pre-stabilized community, nor as the protection of an authentic or original particularity, but as the always open and indeterminate process of translation. This politics of translation could for example be achieved by a horizontal coalition of universalities: Instead of conceiving the contemporary conflict as a fight of the "feminist" west against the "sexist" Islamic cultures, strategic alliances between both western and non-western feminist struggles against local sexist structures become possible. This kind of uncompromising politics of translation is risky, because it puts one's own point of departure at stake, but at the same time it offers the possibility for a homestead of a new community – in the inbetween of cultures.

At the end, I want to compare Butler's conception briefly with Werner Hamacher's notion of multiculturalism as "heterautonomy", understood as a radicalized version of Butler's account.