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The ambiguities of cohabitation

Abstract:

In this essay I examine Judith Butler's ethic of cohabitation as a means of thinking intimacy-geopolitics. Butler's ethic of cohabitation begins with an inability to choose in advance who we inhabit the earth with. Conceptually this idea is linked with the precariousness of life: a subject's life is always in the hands of others, both known and unknown. As such, cohabitation is always an intimate affair that is at the same time global. However, I argue cohabitation as ethical relation fails to map neatly onto cohabitation as spatial practice, and thus it is an ambivalent resource.

Keywords: cohabitation, Judith Butler, Palestine

In this essay I want to examine Judith Butler's ethic of cohabitation as a conceptual resource for thinking intimacy-geopolitics. Butler uses the term cohabitation to describe coexistence grounded in the passivity of social being, or an inability to choose in advance with whom we inhabit the earth. As she has previously argued (Butler 2004, 2009), this vulnerability of the subject is a necessary condition of existence: simply put there is no life without relations to others/Other. There can be no life without sustenance, care and shelter that is always provided by known and unknown others. As such, cohabitation is always an intimate affair that is at the same time 'global' (Pratt & Rosner 2012). However as I will argue, it is also an ambivalent resource, as cohabitation-as-ethical-relation fails to map neatly onto cohabitation-as-spatial-practice.

Butler's ethic of cohabitation emerges from, and is put to work in the context of [Palestine](#)/Israel, where it becomes an argument for a form of binationalism in which Israel ceases to exist as a Zionist state. This would mean, inter alia, full recognition of the Palestinian right of return (Butler 2012: 206). However, Butler's affirmation of unchosen cohabitation is partially enabled through recourse to forms of dwelling that are chosen. For instance, in the Palestinian case, Butler positions the *nakba* in 1948 as a literal unhousing (Ibid: 110), and it is precisely this past form of being housed that gives Palestinians the right of return. Furthermore, when talking about binationalism, Butler states explicitly that this does not mean the unhousing of Israel's Jewish population (Ibid: 214), since this would create another stateless population. In both cases, such dwelling spaces were in some way chosen in the past, and must be affirmed or protected in the future.

There is thus a tension between chosen and unchosen cohabitation. This is clearest in a small aside - 'though one could, to some extent, choose with whom to share a bed or a neighbourhood' (Ibid: 100) that precedes discussion of unchosen cohabitation. Butler subsequently clarifies: 'to cohabit the earth is prior to any possible community or nation or neighbourhood. We might sometimes choose where to live, and who to live by or with, but we cannot choose with whom to cohabit the earth' (Ibid: 125). Butler uses a temporal fix (global cohabitation precedes other forms of cohabitation) to distinguish between the earth (global) and other spaces (local) - a spatial problem.

Translating this conceptual problem empirically helps throw light on the ambiguity of the spatial extent of cohabitation. There are many documented cases of unchosen cohabitation = living with those we don't and cannot choose - functioning at the extent of the neighbourhood (Conflict in Cities 2012). We can also find examples of unchosen cohabitation of houses/apartments, such as in parts of the Old City in Hebron (Sacco 2012), which Butler (2012: 210) terms 'wretched' cohabitation. As both of these examples show, an ethic of cohabitation may be applicable at any spatial extent, but the forms of intimacy it creates may well be incredibly violent. It may of course be possible to foster less violent forms of unchosen cohabitation, which in practical terms, would require various 'solutions' that embrace and rework

the tension between honouring an ethic of cohabitation that goes all the way down to housing, and honouring some form of chosen space that in many ways is crucial to the production of subjectivity (by literally separating an 'I' from a social 'we'). However, such 'practicalities' raise other conceptual questions in turn, such as how an ethic of cohabitation functions in a non-democratic context, where forms of agnostic and antagonistic dissent are not permitted.

For instance, how does one seek to foster a politics of cohabitation in contemporary Israel, when opposition to the Zionist state (and its policies of anti-cohabitation with Palestinians/non-Jews) is explicitly or implicitly expelled? As Butler notes, an ethic of cohabitation proposes the end of the Israeli state as we know it. Butler is very clearly *not* arguing for 'the dismantling of Israel as a state' (Benhabib 2013: 158), but rather seeking the end of Israel as a politically Zionist state form that is fundamentally built on the repression, expulsion and neglect of the non-Jew. Her arguments for Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions can be understood as a means of enacting this end, as concerned global constituencies actively choose to not to share the earth with the state of Israel in its current form, since this state actively denies the inherent plurality of social existence.

However, the conceptual problem of spacing cohabitation re-emerges here, because as critics of Butler argue (see Benhabib 2013), Zionism doesn't seek to inhabit the earth, but merely create a safe space for Jews within it. What such an argument plays on is precisely the spatial extent at which cohabitation works (i.e. 'we don't claim to inhabit the earth, just a part of it, which actually enables cohabitation at the planetary scale'), and the failure of other states to play by the rules of agonistic and antagonistic engagement necessary for cohabitation (i.e. 'we've tried cohabitation, and look what happened: the Nazis murdered 6 million Jews'). Such critiques play on the tension between chosen and unchosen cohabitation. They hone in on the ambiguity in Butler's argument that if one can choose with whom to live in a house, then perhaps one can choose with whom to share a nation, a scaling up that turns cohabitation into a means of ethno-national violence. In this instance, geopolitical violence finds both its justification and means in intimate practice.

If one accepts that it is very hard to conceptually separate the global from the local (see for example Pratt & Rosner 2012), then cohabitation as a particular form of intimacy-geopolitics is a 'janus-faced resource' (Lee & Pratt 2012: 902). It is an ambivalent act, potentially undoing *and* creating forms of violence. Putting it to 'good' use requires that we pay careful attention to when *and where* it is enacted.

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