

Judith Butler and the new anti-Jewish discourse

Speech at the rally against the award of the Adorno Prize to Judith Butler in front of St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt / M. on 11 September 2012

By Matthias Küntzel

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

St. Paul's Church is a historic site. Here, not only Martin Buber and Ernst Bloch, but also Alexander Mitscherlich and Thomas Mann, Amos Oz and Boualem Sansal were honored with prizes – each a worthy recipient. And today: Professor Judith Butler.

But what happens? Frankfurt's mayor takes to his heels and not only the Jewish community in Frankfurt, but also the Central Council of Jews in Germany boycott the ceremony. And even those who have supported Professor Butler with a petition, have thereby simultaneously signed a text which takes its distance from her. And with good reason!

Prof. Butler openly says what she wants. Her most recent book, "Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism", concerns the Middle East conflict. In it, she makes it clear that she thinks the world would be a better place if there were no longer a Jewish state. Prof. Butler does not call for a Palestinian state *next to* Israel, but a bi-national, Muslim-dominated state *instead of* Israel.

This is also the unmistakable goal of the boycott campaign that she supports. Human rights are not the real issue here: Her boycott disregards all the dictatorial and authoritarian regimes in the region in order to target the sole functioning democracy, Israel.

Professor Butler's moral philosophy is a double-standards philosophy. Her theory and her activism go hand in hand.

Today the world is concerned about Iran's nuclear program and Iran's threats of annihilation against Israel. Against this background, is it not strange to find a woman who wants to eliminate the Jewish state's sovereignty recognized as "one of the key thinkers of our time"?

And is it not even stranger that Frankfurt of all cities should honor her with these words – Frankfurt, a center of Judaism in Germany and a city where the Nazi boycott of Jews is still remembered?

However, for this to be happening in the name of Theodor W. Adorno - that's just ludicrous.

All the attempts by Professor Butler and her followers to present themselves as Leftists on the one hand and post-Zionists or anti-Zionists on the other hand, rest on one key assumption: They have to ignore the fact that their vision of the end of Israel is applauded by hundreds of thousands of Islamists who also want to abolish the Jewish state, but in the name of a different vision.

This vision was explained by the Deputy Minister of Religious Endowments of Hamas, Abdallah Jarbu:

“The Jews are foreign bacteria – a microbe unparalleled in the world. May God annihilate this filthy people who have neither religion nor conscience. I condemn whoever believes in normalizing relations with them, whoever supports sitting down with them, and whoever believes that they are human beings.”

Why has the Adorno prize winner consistently refused to take this hatred of Jews into account? And why has she refused to notice the celebrations with which Hamas greeted the murder of thousands of innocents in the Twin Towers eleven years ago to the day?

Lack of time? No! My guess is that it's because Prof. Butler doesn't want to deal with realities that might challenge her worldview. This, however, is not simple ignorance (which would be bad enough for a Middle East activist) but *active* ignorance.

The Adorno prize winner explained to her students at Berkeley how "extremely important" it was to understand, "Hamas, Hezbollah as social and progressive movements that are on the Left, that are part of the global Left.”

Here, Prof. Butler made a mistake. It would have been possible to quickly iron out this mistake and take back these words. Prof. Butler, however, has stubbornly clung to her error.

Just like some of this city's most worthy intellectuals! Because by choosing Prof. Butler, the city's Adorno Prize committee also made a mistake. It would have been possible to quickly iron out this mistake. However, the committee has clung to it.

Prof. Felix Semmelroth, who chairs the committee, called the protest of the Central Council of Jews in Germany against the nomination of Prof. Butler "reasonable and understandable", but defended the committee's prize decision at the same time. Did he want to offend Jews intentionally?

I would prefer not to believe this. But it is not so easy to do so. Many in this country are aware of a new kind of hostility when it comes to Israel and the situation of Jews.

It started with a poem by Günter Grass with the headline: "What needs to be said." Here the novelist claimed that Israel constitutes a threat to world peace. Moreover, he accused the Israelis of wanting to "extinguish the Iranian people". The point is completely irrational, since Günter Grass ignores the threats from Tehran just as Professor Butler ignores the intentions of Hezbollah and Hamas.

Next, a judge in Cologne succumbed to another "what-needs-to-be-said" temptation and issued a verdict stating that the ritual of Jewish infant circumcision is contrary to child welfare. This triggered a mass movement of writers and bloggers aimed at "liberating" the children of the Jews from becoming Jews in the traditional form.

Charlotte Knobloch, the former chair-woman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany deplors a mood "which I have not experienced in this country since 1945 " and adds: "For the first time my foundations are shaken. For the first time I feel resignation in myself. I seriously wonder whether this country still wants us.”

And now a prize worth 50,000 euros for an academic who advocates the abolition of Israel as a Jewish state. St. Paul's Church is a historic place, the right place to proclaim loudly and clearly that we are fed up: Enough is enough!

We have to face the fact that, in all three cases, this new hostility is fueled by certain academic elites and by phenomena that fundamentally contradict some central concerns of Theodor W. Adorno. There is:

- a fading away of a sense of historical awareness and responsibility;
- a loss of empathy when it comes to the position of the Jews in Israel and Germany; and
- an increase in ignorance, especially when it comes to antisemitism in the Middle East.

That is why our protest today against the award to Prof. Butler is so important.

No one wants to restrict Prof. Butler's intellectual independence or silence her as a critic of Israeli governmental policies. The point is that a professor who rejects the existence of the Jewish state cannot be an Adorno-laureate.

Our protest – as is already evident today – will have a lasting effect. The controversy over Judith Butler's Adorno prize could ultimately mean, writes Sonja Vogel in the daily *Taz*, that Butler will suffer the same fate as French philosopher Michael Foucault “after his indiscriminate jubilation over the Iranian revolution in 1979”. In the future, Butler “will face similar difficulties in being taken seriously by humanists.” Indeed.