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Gender as Social Temporality: Butler (and Marx)

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Abstract

This article addresses the notions of gender performativity and temporality in Butler's early work on gender. The paper is articulated in four steps. First it gives an account of the role and nature of temporality in Butler's theory of gender performativity. Second, it shows some similarities and connections between the role played by temporality in Butler's theory of gender performativity and its role in Marx's analysis of capital. Third, it raises some criticisms of Butler's understanding of temporality and historicity, focusing in particular on the lack of historicisation of her own categories in both Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter. This deficit is a consequence of the epistemological framework within which she is operating, in particular of her understanding of social practices and relations through the lens of linguistic concepts extrapolated from their theoretical context. The article concludes by referring to Floyd's and Hennessy's analyses of the formation of sexual identities as examples of the fruitful historicisation of gender performativity, which also sheds some light on the 'the abstract character' of the temporality of gender performativity.

Keywords

Butler – Marx – gender performativity – sexual identities – temporality – capitalism

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At the end of the Nineties, Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler engaged in an interesting debate on the ‘merely cultural’ character of gender performativity and sexual oppression. While they both agreed that such oppression is rooted in material conditions and has material effects, they disagreed on what one should mean by ‘material’, and on the relation of the capitalist mode of production to both gender performativity and sexual oppression. In her article, ‘Merely Cultural’, replying to some of the objections raised against *Gender Trouble* by Fraser, Butler stressed the role of normative heterosexuality within the capitalist mode of production.\(^1\) Referring to the Marxist analysis of the centrality of family for the reproduction of the labour-force, Butler tried to show that normative heterosexuality, accompanied by the consequent misrecognition of homosexuality and other objects of sexual-desire choices, is a formidable tool for the perpetual reproduction of the mononuclear and heterosexual family. In other words, far from being a merely cultural fact, normative heterosexuality plays a crucial role for the mode of production itself and for the process of social reproduction as a whole.

In her reply to this article, Fraser welcomed ‘Butler’s commitment in this essay to identifying, and retrieving, the genuinely valuable aspects of Marxism and the socialist feminism of the 1970s, which current intellectual and political fashions conspire to repress;\(^2\) but she criticised her for showing a certain tendency to confound what is ‘material’ and what is ‘economic’. According to Fraser’s distinction, the first entails a set of forms of gender and sexual discrimination implemented and reproduced by social practices and institutions, such as the education and healthcare systems, whereas ‘economic’ refers to the relations of production. Sexual oppression, in both accounts, has a properly material aspect; it has consequences for people’s lives and is sustained by social institutions, which cannot be seen as mere speech acts and language, or as mere symbolic misrecognition. But what is not clear in Butler’s discourse is whether normative heterosexuality should also be considered a constitutive component of the relations of production. For example, does it or does it not play a structuring role in the division of labour?

Butler’s arguments in ‘Merely Cultural’ aimed at challenging the hierarchy of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ oppressions, or between exploitation and oppression, for which she reproached an unspecified ‘orthodox Marxism’. Butler criticised the ‘orthodox Marxist’ assumption that the cultural sphere and economy might be separate in any stable way. In addition, Butler also opened the fruitful possibility of thinking the construction of gender in its

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1 Butler 1998; Butler 2008; Fraser 1997.
2 Fraser 1998, p. 140.
relation to the capitalistic mode of production from a vantage point that questions the reductionist and unidirectional analytical approach expressed by the infamous ‘base-superstructure’ formula. This possibility, however, has remained underdeveloped and undertheorised in her work on gender.

At the core of the debate between Butler and Fraser was, to use Rosemary Hennessy’s words, the question of the relation between ‘the discourses by which we make the world intelligible and the structures of accumulation and labor’. Referring to the Althusserian notion of ‘overdetermination’, Hennessy emphasises how the traditional base-superstructure model fails to recognise both the relative autonomy of culture and that the relation of determination is not unidirectional, because cultural-ideological constructions also affect and act upon the relations of production and their development. For example, while it is certainly true that capitalist development is a dissolving force with regard to preexisting systems of social relations, it is also true that this tendency is highly contradictory and that a certain kind of patriarchal and familial relations, in certain regions of the world or in certain spheres of commodity production, can not only survive, but even shape the division of labour and relations of exploitation. In other words, the base-superstructure model – which actually does not belong to Marx, who uses the base-superstructure metaphor very rarely and in very allusive terms – fails to see that capitalist exploitation never takes place in a pure form or in an empty space. Indeed, it must necessarily deal with historically preexisting economic, social and cultural-ideological constructions, some of which survive, are reshaped by and at the same time contribute to shaping the relations of exploitation, giving birth to various and variable social formations. But, I would argue, even the notion of ‘overdetermination’, by maintaining a model of spatial separation between spheres acting upon each other (i.e. the economic structure and the ideological or cultural sphere), does not do complete justice to the complex and rich way in which Marx analyses social relations.

Hennessy lamented that the prevailing trend in queer theory for dealing with the necessity of overcoming the base-superstructure model has been to replace the relation of unidirectional determination with a ceaseless play of different kinds of social relations – in other words, with the idea that

3 Hennessy 2000.
4 Althusser 2005.
5 For a criticism of the spatial model of separated spheres in Althusser’s notion of overdetermination, see Meiksins Wood 1995, pp. 49–75. For a critique of the structuralist approach to the relationship between gender oppression and capitalism, see Ferguson 1999 and Ferguson 2008. For a defence of structuralist Marxist feminism, see Gimenez 1997.
everything determines everything else, so much so that in the end the very idea of determination becomes meaningless.6 While the situation has significantly changed in the last fifteen years, following the publication of a number of texts focusing attention again on the relationship between sexual oppression, sexual identity and current capitalist dynamics,7 Hennessy’s observation applies perfectly to Butler’s early work on gender. In *Bodies that Matter*, for example, Butler goes so far as to defend some form of infinite regression in her account of the citationality characteristic of gender performativity:

And yet the already existing law that he [the judge] cites, from where does that law draw its authority? Is there an original authority, a primary source, or is it, rather, in the very practice of citation, potentially infinite in regression, that the ground of authority is constituted as perpetual *deferral*? In other words, it is precisely through the infinite deferral of authority to an irrevocable past that authority itself is constituted. That referral is the repeated act by which legitimation occurs. The pointing to a ground which is never recovered becomes authority’s groundless ground.8

The insistence on the plurality of social practices which enforce the norms forming and regulating identities, combined with the refusal of notions of determination, may offer a phenomenology and a critical genealogy, but it is constitutively incapable of providing the kind of causal explanation that could serve in developing a more robust phenomenology of such identities. Moreover, the attempt to show that class relations do not have any kind of priority over other social relations may lead not only to overlooking their necessary and unavoidable role in the very existence of capitalism, but also to erasing the very category of exploitation from the analysis altogether.

It is in light of this general problematic, i.e. of the creation of a non-reductionist framework for analysing the relations between capitalism, gender and sexuality that accounts for the determining role of capitalist relations of production, that I would like to develop a series of suggestions concerning performativity and temporality in Butler’s early work on gender. This paper is articulated in four steps. First I give an account of the role and nature of

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7 See, for example, Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan (eds.) 2002; Duggan 2002; Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz (eds.) 2005; Drucker 2011. The theoretically most articulated treatment of this topic is Floyd 2009.
8 Butler 2011, pp. 70–1.
temporality in Butler's theory of gender performativity. Second, I show some similarities and connections between the role played by temporality in Butler's theory of gender performativity and its role in Marx's analysis of capital. In both cases we have not only a strategy of denaturalisation of social phenomena such as gender and capital, but also the idea that transformative practices can take place because of and from within the cracks and inconsistencies of those social phenomena in their own performatve repetition. Third, I raise some criticisms regarding Butler's understanding of temporality and historicity, focusing in particular on the lack of historicisation of her own categories in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. This deficit, I argue, is a consequence of the linguistic framework within which she is operating, that is, of her understanding of social practices and relations through the lens of linguistic concepts extrapolated from their theoretical context. Finally, I refer to Floyd's and Hennessy's analyses of the formation of sexual identities as examples of the fruitful historicisation of gender performativity: both Floyd and Hennessy persuasively relate the reification of sexual identities to the diffusion of commodity mass consumption, helping in this way to shed some light on what I call ‘the abstract character’ of the temporality of gender performativity.

After having summarised what I will do in this article, it is probably advisable to further announce what I will not do. The aim of this article is to address some specific theoretical problems concerning time and temporality in Butler's early work on gender, and particularly in *Gender Trouble*: a review and articulated discussion of more recent queer theory's elaborations on time is, therefore, outside of its scope. The narrow focus of this article also explains the absence of a treatment of the specific relation between queerness and race or of recent work on race and performativity.9

**Temporality in Butler's Work**

The relevance of the question of temporality in the analysis of performativity is substantiated by a number of writings that, in the wake of Butler's groundbreaking work, have focused on this aspect. Queer theorists' engagement with notions of time and temporality has spanned from the elaboration of a

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9 The original formulation of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* did not include any sustained discussion of race. In *Bodies that Matter* and in subsequent works by Butler issues of race and racialisation are increasingly incorporated. See, for example, Butler 1997a.
conception of ‘queer time’,\textsuperscript{10} to analysis of the way temporal processes and time regulation contribute to the sedimentation and normalisation of racial and sexual identities thereby articulating queerness and racialisation,\textsuperscript{11} to the relation between sedimented historical past and futurity, that is, agency, new openings, possibilities, and transformations.\textsuperscript{12}

This insistence on temporality, which Butler shares in common with other queer theorists, is often a theoretical strategy aimed at resisting attempts at naturalising and dehistoricising gender relations and identities. By stressing the temporal character of the practices that sediment gender identities, indeed, queer theorists de-essentialise gender and open a path for transformation, futurity, and agency. In their Introduction to the volume \textit{Queer Times, Queer Becoming}, for example, McCallum and Tuhkanen write:

\begin{quote}
To address this problem of time and of life thus indirectly, by problematising language, categories, definitions, and framings, is to follow a critical, antiessentialist line of thinking – a philosophical scaffolding through which queer theory, impelled not only by Foucault but by deconstructionist critiques of identity and feminist contestations of constricting
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} See, for example, Halberstam 2005. In Halberstam’s work, queer temporality is understood as a specific ‘way of life’, an embodied alternative to the conventional temporality of people’s lives. Contrary to this conventional temporality, determined and rhythmmed by the cycle of highly regulated markers of experience, such as birth, marriage, reproduction and inheritance, and by a desire for long periods of stability, queer time ‘is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance’ (Halberstam 2005, p. 6).

\textsuperscript{11} See, for example, Freeman 2007. As Elizabeth Freeman writes in her Introduction to an issue of \textit{GLQ} dedicated to ‘Queer Temporalities’, temporality is a mode of implantation through which institutional forces appear like somatic facts: through the manipulation of time, and therefore of the temporal experience, ‘essences’ are not just qualified, but actually produced. It is, then, the manipulation of time that makes body politics possible at all. Freeman deepens her critique of the idea of an objectivity and naturalness of the temporality of our lives through the articulation of a notion of ‘chrononormativity’ in Freeman 2010.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Freccero 2006, Love 2007, and Muñoz 2009. That queer theory should concern itself with futurity has now become a controversial issue. Within the debate on the ‘anti-social’ turn, for example, Lee Edelman has suggested that queer theorists should reject any futurity, hence any normative politics, and fully endorse that negativity to which queer people have anyway been bound: Edelman 2004.
definitions of sexual differences, emerged out of a critique of Western metaphysics and its stable ontology.\textsuperscript{13}

As is well known, in \textit{Gender Trouble} Butler opposes an essentialist view on gender and the sexed body, arguing that the appearance of an ontological status of gender is nothing but the outcome of a series of regulatory practices that, through their sedimentation, conceal their genesis. Gender is therefore socially constructed, and this construction makes the body socially visible, as it is only through the mediation of this series of social practices that the body becomes gendered at all: the body ‘… is not a “being”, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality.’\textsuperscript{14}

Butler’s claim, however, is not just that gender is the social outcome of a set of regulatory practices, but moreover that gender is to be identified with these very practices in their being or having been performed: ‘Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.’\textsuperscript{15} Gender is therefore both the sedimentation of a series of norms, which present themselves in a reified form as corporeal styles, as the ‘natural configuration of bodies’, and the practices that enact these styles and therefore produce gendered subjects. Time is, in both cases, a crucial factor. In the first case, the sedimentation of norms and the corporeal styles are produced over time. In the second case, enacting these styles means repeating over time the acts that perform gender and create the gendered subject. As Butler writes:

\begin{quote}
… gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a \textit{stylized repetition of acts}… This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted \textit{social temporality}.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Gender is defined as a \textit{constituted} social temporality: if corporeal styles are the reified form taken by the sedimentation of norms, they could be understood as objectified time, as past time which haunts the present under the form

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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\item \textsuperscript{13} McCallum and Tuhkanen (eds.) 2011, p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Butler 2008, p. 189.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Butler 2008, p. 190.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Butler 2008, p. 191.
\end{thebibliography}
of reification. It is the fact that these norms are given in a reified form that grants them the appearance of their ‘naturalness’. In this appearance of ‘naturalness’, moreover, we can recognise the typical inversion of cause and effect characteristic of reification as such. Indeed, the notion of reification implicitly plays a central role in Butler's account of gender. In Gender Trouble, for example, she underlines the traces of the Marxist notion of reification in both Wittig's and Foucault's theories, particularly in their insistence on the confusion of ‘cause’ with ‘result’ that leads as a consequence to taking ‘sex’ as an immediate given. Since Butler shares this approach with Wittig and Foucault, by acknowledging the Marxist origin of the critique of reification in their theories, she is by the same token implicitly acknowledging her own debt to Marxism.17 However, I would argue, the absence of an explicit articulation of the notion of reification in Gender Trouble, and the lack of a more detailed and historically specific analysis of the social relations that reify gender, has led to a series of misreadings of her position, and in particular to the conflation of performativity and the conscious performance of gender operated by a putatively sovereign and free subject. In order to dispel precisely these kinds of misreadings, in Bodies that Matter Butler relies more heavily on Foucault's notion of normativity and insists on the constraining character of a performativity understood as the ‘forced reiteration of norms’:

In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity.18

The process through which a body becomes gendered implies a constant and ‘stylized repetition of acts through time’: the temporality at stake here is that of the ‘reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’.19 In other words, these repetitions are necessary for the continuous reproduction of gender. Precisely because this construction is not a singular act or event, it is not ‘a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects’, but is rather ‘a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms’, and hence a certain instability is implied in this very

17 Butler 2008, p. 35.
same process. Indeed, bodies never entirely comply with the norms that constrain their materialisation: gaps and fissures are constantly opened in the very process of repetition, and the norms are never perfectly cited.

As we have seen, it is possible to distinguish the capacity of sedimentation from that of re-enactment. The re-enactment of objectified norms always implies the necessary possibility of variation in the way norms are performed. In conclusion, socially constituted temporality and repetition – in the form of a historicity without history – are the two key concepts for Butler’s de-essentialisation of gender. Even the gendered body is, as we have seen, a gendered corporealisation of time, so that the spatial metaphor of a ‘ground’ is nothing but repetition and sedimentation in the form of reification. Finally, as the enactment of corporeal styles requires a performative repetition of acts and practices, gender identity can never be considered stable, for it is always exposed to the possibility of the breaking of this abstract temporality, through lapses, resistances, the ironical play of gender performances, ruptures of the binary boundaries imposed by heteronormativity, and the incoherence between gender and object of sexual-desire choice.

Opposing an essentialist view and locating the construction of gender in a social temporality opens, therefore, the possibility of transformation. Whether this transformation should be located at the level of the individual performance, or – consistent with the social character of the norms which create gender – should be understood as a collective process, is not fully clarified in Gender Trouble. It becomes clearer in later writings by Butler: because such a thing as an individual outside of the social relations that constitute it does not exist, the potential for freedom implied in performativity is always a social one.

Marx and Temporality

In this section I would like to explore some similarities between Butler’s analysis of the temporality of gender reification and Marx’s understanding of the temporality of capital. Butler herself unambiguously emphasises the centrality of temporality for her own work in a short text published in 1997:

20 Butler 2011, p. xix.
21 Butler 2011, p. xii.
22 Butler 2008: ‘If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a “ground” will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time.’
'Further Reflection on Conversations of our Time'. Here she welcomes Laclau's and Mouffe's work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as a Marxist work that seriously addresses the way in which discourse is not a mere representation of preexisting social and historical realities, but actually constitutive of them. Their work, according to her, signals a shift away from the Althusserian consideration of the mode of production as a structural totality or as a theoretical object, a shift that allows the reintroduction of considerations of temporality and futurity into the analysis of social formations.23 While Butler welcomes Laclau's and Mouffe's work for its novelty in bringing the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, she is actually well aware that the consideration of the temporal character of social formations, including a concern for futurity, is central to Marx's work. In *Bodies that Matter*, indeed, in an interesting endnote on Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, she emphasises the similarity between her understanding of materiality and Marx's criticism of trivial and naive materialism and empiricism. As she points out, in the *Theses on Feuerbach* social-transformative praxis is constitutive of materiality itself:

\[\ldots\] according to this new kind of materialism that Marx proposes, the object is not only transformed, but in some significant sense, the object is transformative activity itself and, further, its materiality is established through this temporal movement from a prior to a latter state. In other words, the object *materializes* to the extent that it is a site of *temporal transformation*.24

In addition to this reference to the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Butler could have noticed that the consideration of time is crucial to Marx's understanding of capital. First of all, capitalist economy can – as with every other mode of production – be reduced in the last instance to an economy of time, as Marx famously states in the *Grundrisse*:

Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself. Society likewise has to distribute its time in a purposeful way, in order to achieve a production adequate to its overall needs; just as the individual has to distribute time correctly in order to achieve knowledge in proper proportions or in order to satisfy the various demands on his activity. Thus, economy of time, along with the planned distribution of labour

23 Butler 1997b.

24 Butler 2011, pp. 191–2, n. 5.
time among the various branches of production, remains the first economic law on the basis of communal production.  

What differentiates one mode of production from another, then, is – among other factors – precisely the historically specific way in which time is organised. In capitalism, as stressed, among others, by Stavros Tombazos, Daniel Bensaïd and Massimiliano Tomba, time is both a social relation and the measure of social relations. In this economy of time, different temporalities are intertwined – that of production analysed in *Capital* Volume I, of circulation in Volume II and of reproduction as a whole in Volume III. Far from being a harmonic junction of these different intertwined times, the time of the capitalist mode of production is fundamentally ‘out of joint’. The problem for it, in fact, lies in the continuous necessity of combining together discordant and conflicting temporalities. These conflicts of time do not simply concern the relations between production, circulation, and reproduction. One can retrace a first crucial conflict already within the realm of production, in the opposition between living labour and dead labour, and between concrete labour and abstract labour. Like a commodity, constant capital is, from the point of view of value, a solid crystallisation of abstract labour time; they are both objectifications of time haunting the present. In the commodity the social character of human labour is concealed, for it manifests itself in a reified form, as the objective character of the product. In fixed capital, dead labour, *i.e.* objectified, past labour, posits itself against living labour as an external and hostile power, which disciplines the worker’s body, by subduing the rich temporality of her life to the homogenous, regular, mechanical temporality of abstract labour. In the *Grundrisse*, this opposition is also described as a relation between space and time, for past labour haunts present, living labour in the form of space:

27 Marx defines the commodity, from the point of view of value, both as a solid crystal of labour and as crystallised labour time. This second definition occurs to my mind when Marx is taking into account commodities as determinate *quanta* of labour, in other words when he refers to the ‘measure’ of labour. See for example this passage from Chapter 7 of Volume 1: ‘Definite quantities of product, these quantities being determined by experience, now represent nothing but definite quantities of labour, definite masses of crystallised labour-time. They are nothing more than the materialisation of so many hours or so many days of social labour.’ (Marx 1976, p. 297.)
The only thing distinct from objectified labour is non-objectified labour, labour which is still objectifying itself, labour as subjectivity. Or, objectified labour, i.e. labour which is present in space, can also be opposed, as past labour, to labour which is present in time.29

Within circulation, past labour interacts and sometimes conflicts, in the form of commodity capital and money capital, with the temporality of the repetition of the circuits of capital, where capital ceaselessly goes through the phantasmagoria of its continuous metamorphoses. Within the process of capitalist reproduction as a whole, this tension between conflicting temporalities finally explodes into a proliferation of multiple times, those of the concrete social formations to which capital, considered as a totality in its real movement, gives birth.30 The movement of capital, however, is not just the mere outcome of the contingent and arbitrary overlapping of different temporalities and social relations. Its core, its mystery, which Marx explains by entering into the ‘the hidden abode of production’,31 is the movement of the self-valorisation of value, the process of reproduction on a progressively increasing scale. In other words, it is the process of accumulation, which implies the constantly repeated appropriation of surplus-value, and the constantly repeated transformation of living labour into dead labour.

Whereas Butler speaks of gender as a ‘constituted social temporality’, Marx describes commodity and constant capital as crystals of objectified abstract labour time: in both cases, we have the reification of time as a social relation. In Butler, the spatiality of gender, i.e., its inscription on the body, is nothing but constituted social temporality, in other words, social acts performed in the past. Likewise, for Marx past, objectified labour time opposes qua space the present time of living labour. Whereas Butler denies that gender is a fact, by insisting that gender is constantly constituted through the repetition of performative acts over time, Marx insists that capital is not a thing, but rather the process of self-valorisation of value which implies the repetition of the appropriation of surplus-value as well as the repetition of the circuits of capital and their unity. One might say that through these repetitions capital performs itself. As Marx writes in Chapter 4 of Volume II, referring to the metamorphoses of capital within circulation:

31 Marx 1976, p. 279.
Capital, as self-valorizing value, does not just comprise class relations, a definite social character that depends on the existence of labour as wage-labour. It is a movement, a circulatory process through different stages, which itself in turn includes three different forms of the circulatory process. Hence it can only be grasped as a movement, and not as a static thing.\(^{32}\)

Finally, the forms taken by industrial capital during its metamorphoses are fluid.\(^{33}\) In these passages, besides giving the definition of capital as a movement, Marx also refutes a narrowly economic view of capitalist relations of productions, for these do not entail only the exploitation of wage-labour within the productive process, but the whole of the metamorphoses of capital. Taking into account the dynamic and broad view of capitalist relations displayed here helps avoid a reductionist interpretation of capitalist relations and of the interaction between culture and economy. To use a formulation by Tombazos:

Capital is a conceptual organization of time. It is not a simple social relation but a living rationality, an active concept, the ‘immediate idea’ of economy, as probably Hegel would put it, ‘the abstraction in actu’, as Marx writes several times. There is no relation of separation between the abstract laws, immanent to the active economic rationality, and the historical time, but rather a relation of communication and reciprocal fecundation. The first is realized in the concrete historical formations, which are economic, institutional and political…\(^{34}\)

Marx’s insistence on the process character of capital emphasises the fact that far from being a natural phenomenon rooted in an immutable human nature, capital is a specific form of organisation of social practices. As such, it has an eminently historical character and, therefore, despite its appearance of naturalness, it is not the unavoidable destiny of humanity. Moreover, the possibility for a transformative praxis, or for class struggle, is rooted in this very process character, in the process of capital’s own reproduction, which

\(^{32}\) Marx 1978, p. 185.

\(^{33}\) Marx 1978, p. 184: ‘as a whole, then, the capital is simultaneously present, and spatially coexistent, in its various phases. But each part is constantly passing from one phase or functional form into another, and thus functions in all of them in turn. The forms are therefore fluid forms, and their simultaneity is mediated by their succession’.

\(^{34}\) Tombazos 1994, pp. 11–12.
is filled with contradictions and cracks. This bond between temporality and possibility for agency and transformation characterises both Marx's and Butler's enterprise of the denaturalisation of capital and gender, respectively.

**Gender Temporality without History**

So far I have stressed the similarities in the centrality of temporality in both Butler's account of gender and Marx's account of capital. This similarity, however, is coupled with a deeper dissimilarity, which must now be addressed. Referring to Butler's endnote on the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Kevin Floyd points out how Butler fails to make a distinction between the temporal and the historical: matter, for Marx, is not just temporal, as Butler underlines, but also social and historical.\(^{35}\) Whereas, in order to denaturalise gender and even the sexed body, Butler insists several times on the historicity of norms, history is surprisingly absent from her analysis both in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. In the case of *Gender Trouble*, this is due to the strong influence played by Derrida, as I will explain later, in the elaboration of the notion of performativity. In the case of *Bodies that Matter*, while Foucault's influence becomes stronger and Butler's analysis becomes less abstract than in her previous work, nevertheless the historical or at least genealogical dimension of norms is *de facto* downplayed, in spite of the formal appeals to historicity, so that even her analysis of constraints remains abstract and mostly confined to the psychoanalytical dimension.\(^{36}\)

For example, it remains unclear whether Butler's analysis of gender can be consistently applied to different historical circumstances, across different modes of production or historical epochs. To be sure, the aim of her work is, as I have said, to de-essentialise gender: this, of course, implies that the constructed character of gender should be taken as a trans-historical phenomenon. In other words, all historical epochs have constructed and objectified gender. However, the manner of such reification is not forcibly the same across different epochs. Now, one of the fundamental features of Butler's elaboration on gender is the bond that she rightly analyses between gender and sexuality: “Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of

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36 The constraints she discusses here, indeed, are those operative in the very structure of language in Lacan's account of the assumption of a sexed position through the incest taboo: Butler 2011, pp. 58–73.
coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”

However, in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault insists on the fact that the very notion of sexuality and the subsequent reification of homosexual and heterosexual identities is a relatively recent phenomenon that he locates toward the end of the nineteenth century. As usual, Foucault describes this phenomenon in terms of regimes of knowledge, the creation and diffusion of new disciplines, among which psychoanalysis figures as the culminating point of a process of reification of sexuality. When he needs to further clarify the historical periodisation of this process, surprisingly enough – given his refusal of notions of determination – he links it in a very quick passage to the rise of the bourgeois class and to the needs of capitalist production and their transformation over time:

The first phase corresponded to the need to form a ‘labour force’ … and to ensure its reproduction. … The second phase corresponded to that epoch of *Spätkapitalismus* in which the exploitation of wage labour does not demand the same violent and physical constraints as in the nineteenth century, and where the politics of the body does not require the elision of sex or its restriction solely to the reproductive function; it relies instead on a multiple channeling into the controlled circuits of the economy – on what has been called a hyperrepressive desublimation.

In this light, it would be natural to think that Butler’s diagnosis of gender applies only to a specific historical period: this aspect, however, is not addressed in her work. As a consequence Butler fails on her own terrain, for, despite insisting several times on historicity, she neither historicises her own categories nor addresses the historical conditions that make her own description of gender possible in the first instance. Moreover, since she erases capital from her analysis altogether, even when she addresses the issue of constraints in *Bodies that Matter*, it is unclear what kind of constraints capitalist relations of production impose upon those variations in the citation and repetition of norms, in which she locates a possibility of agency and transformation.

Indeed, the character of these variations is rather abstract: are these variations only random, are they attributable only to free agency, or do certain variations in the repetition of the re-enactment of norms follow an underlying logic driven by something we still need to discover? Moreover, if every

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37 Butler 2008, p. 23.
38 Foucault 1990, p. 114.
repetition is never quite the same as what is repeated, if the norm is never perfectly cited, how can we distinguish variations from repetitions? And in general, is this methodology of analysis capable of giving a serious account of empirical historical phenomena of transformation and subversion? Since her emphasis on the temporality of gender is not coupled with a historically specific analysis of these sedimented norms and their content, it remains unclear what kind of constraints this sedimentation embodies vis-à-vis possibilities of subversive variation.40

The formal character of the analysis of gender performativity in Gender Trouble is the consequence of Butler's application of Derrida's notions of iterability and citationality to the deconstruction of gender.41 Butler, indeed, borrows the notion of the performative utterance from Austin, read through Derrida, and applies it to a wider range of social practices, which are not sensu stricto linguistic.

While a full discussion of Derrida's reading of Austin is outside the scope of this article, it may nonetheless be useful to briefly discuss the role that the notion of iterability plays in Derrida's discussion of Austin's notion of performative utterances, and then to briefly mention a couple of passages from Butler's Excitable Speech, published in 1997, which may shed light on her previous work on gender performativity. In How to Do Things with Words, Austin defines performative utterances as those utterances that, instead of describing a state of affairs (such as constative utterances), do an action at the very moment in which they are uttered. While they look like statements, such utterances cannot be either 'true' or 'false', as their function is not to report how things are. The famous examples provided by Austin in his preliminary definition and isolation of performative utterances from constative utterances are those of the naming of a ship, of the 'I do' uttered at a marriage ceremony, of a will (‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother’), and of utterances such as 'I bet'. What these examples have in common is that 'to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I'm doing it: it is to do it.'42

40 On this point, see the excellent remarks by Floyd 2009, pp. 115–19.
42 Austin 2003, p. 6. See also the illuminating interpretation of Austin's treatment of the performati ve in Crary 2007, pp. 49–95. While Crary agrees with Derrida, against most commentators, in reading Austin as attacking the idea of literal-sentence meaning in general, she suggests, contra Derrida, that this opens the path not to overcoming the idea of objectivity, but rather to elaborating a less narrow conception of objectivity.
While discussing Austin’s notion of the performative utterance in ‘Signature Event Context’, Derrida first welcomes Austin’s achievement in freeing the analysis of the performative from the authority of truth-value, and in opening the path to an understanding of communication which is neither narrowly defined by the transmission of a semantic content nor oriented by the ideal of a correspondence to a state of affairs. Derrida nonetheless identifies the root of Austin’s aporetic treatment of the performative and of his difficulty and ultimately failure in providing a persuasive classification of performative utterances in isolation from the constative ones. According to Derrida, the reason for these difficulties lies in the fact that Austin does not take account of what he calls ‘the graphematic in general’, that is, the system of predicates that is always-already entailed in the structure of locution as such, before any distinction between illocutory and perlocutory.43 One of the characteristics of the graphematic is iterability. What this means is that a sign is such only insofar as it can be repeated, and it is precisely this repetition that confers the status of a sign to it. From this viewpoint every speech act is structurally citational and has a ritual character. Moreover, this general citationality or iterability is what makes performative utterances possible at all: a performative speech-act could not be successful without citing: ‘Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”?44 It is precisely this general iterability and the citational character of every speech act that Austin fails to properly acknowledge. To speak of a general iterability as a constitutive characteristic of language naturally raises the problem of the status of the event. Derrida answers the question of whether we can still speak of an event if every speech act is an iteration, by suggesting that we should overcome the opposition between the purity of the event, on the one hand, and citationality and iterability, on the other: ‘Rather than oppose citation or iteration to the non iteration of an event, one ought to construct a differential typology of forms of iteration’.45 Indeed, Derrida’s point here is that the repetition of a sign is never the iteration of the identical, for each repetition entails a variation. What we would need, then, is some sort of classification of different kinds of iteration/variation, rather than looking for the purity of eventhood.

45 Ibid.
As is well known, the notion of the performative elaborated by Austin is key to Butler’s conception of gender performativity. But her reception of Austin is crucially mediated through Derrida, as is clear not only in the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*46 and in her insistence on citation and repetition throughout the book, but also in her endorsement of Derrida’s criticism of Austin for maintaining the illusion of an intentional subject as the author of discursive effects. She writes in *Excitable Speech*: ‘Indeed, could it be that the production of the subject as originator of his/her effects is precisely a consequence of this dissimulated citationality?’47 Earlier in this text, she insists that to challenge the idea of a sovereign subject does not equate to demolishing agency as such. On the contrary, one can properly understand agency only insofar as one takes account of the enabling constraints within which agency takes place, that is, only insofar as one gets rid of the idea of sovereignty. But what kind of constraints does Butler have in mind here? It appears that these constraints are fundamentally linguistic ones: ‘The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset.’48 It is my contention that in her earlier work on gender, and especially in *Gender Trouble*, Butler endorses a linguistic turn in the understanding of social practices – a linguistic turn that shifts her attention away from the historical (non-teleological) dimension of Foucault’s genealogical project. What get lost here are two of the three methodological principles governing genealogical analysis: discontinuity and specificity, that is, the idea that systems of discourses are unique and irreducible, and that they are not derived from previous systems through continuous transformations.49 As Foucault writes in *Power/Knowledge*:

One can agree that structuralism formed the most systematic effort to evacuate the concept of the event, not only from ethnology but from a whole series of other sciences and in the extreme case of history. In that sense, I don’t see who could be more of an anti-structuralist than myself.50

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46 Butler 2008, p. xv. Here Butler clarifies that her original reading of performativity was strongly influenced by Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s ‘Before the Law’.
47 Butler 1997a, p. 51.
48 Butler 1997a, p. 16.
Instead of paying attention to radical discontinuities, Butler attributes a citational character to social practices, both those that stylise the body by repeating the norm, and those that subvert the norm they repeat, including the struggles of queer people: these struggles, indeed, are interpreted as performative variations that cite the norm in such a way as to subvert it: ‘The critical task is…to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.’51 The application of notions of citationality and iterability to social practices, however, meets severe limitations. Notions of citation and variation are rather insufficient tools to understanding historical transformations. Can we establish historical periodisations on this basis? When does a variation represent a shift of historical epoch, and why? Can we conceive of a notion of historical event within such a framework?

It is useful, here, to compare Butler’s passage on agency (above) to the opening lines of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795. In like manner a beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and

51 Butler 2008, p. 201. The same view is restated in somewhat different terms in Butler 2011: ‘Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a “pure” opposition, a “transcendence” of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure’ (Butler 2011, p. 184).
can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new.\textsuperscript{52}

On a superficial reading, this passage might seem to suggest a view of agency similar to that emphasised by Butler.\textsuperscript{53} On closer scrutiny, however, the opposite is true. To use Butler’s words, we have here a discrepancy between the citational and parodic character of the collective self-understanding and self-representation of the Parisian revolutionary working class of 1848 and what they were actually doing. While they interpreted their actions in the terms of the French Revolution of 1789, in other words, while for them the only form of intelligibility of what they were doing was that of a citation of past historical events, their actions were already beginning something radically new that was not a citation and that was something different from a subversive repetition of a norm. As Marx clarifies immediately after the passage quoted above, this ‘conjuring up of the dead of world history’ hid the fact that these revolutionaries were actually performing the task of the present. The reason for this is that history does not know repetitions: Marx’s indication that great historical events repeat themselves as a farce should be more correctly understood as emphasising the fact that historical events do not repeat themselves at all.\textsuperscript{54} The farce, then, lies only in the deception of the actors of history in the aftermath of the 1848 revolution, who, by thinking that they are repeating the events of the past, do not know what they are doing, dress in outdated costumes, and play characters who are not their own in a collective comedy of errors.

In conclusion, the insistence on the citationality characteristic of social practices, and the fact that Butler situates the possibility of struggle in the participation in subversive repetitions, conflates constraints on meanings, or on the intelligibility of actions, with constraints on social practices more generally.

\textsuperscript{52} Marx 1975, pp. 103–4.
\textsuperscript{53} And indeed, the \textit{Eighteen Brumaire} has been subject to postmodern readings. See, for example, Cowling and Martin (eds.) 2002, and in particular James Martin’s article, which applies the notion of the performative taken from Austin to Marx’s understanding of class struggle in France: Martin 2002.
\textsuperscript{54} See, for example, Massimiliano Tomba: ‘The form of repetition redefines the very form of Hegel’s quote itself: the formula of repetition of the story renders “Hegel” a farce himself, and not because history, due to some mysterious law, is supposed to repeat itself in the form of farce, but because there is no repetition’ (Tomba 2013, p. 23).
The Abstract Temporality of Gender Performativity

As I noted earlier, the temporality that Butler takes into account in her analysis of gender performativity has an abstract character: it is a temporality of sedimentation, repetition, and variation. In the previous section of this paper I emphasised the ahistorical character of this abstract temporality and suggested that this is the outcome of Butler’s linguistic approach to social practices. In the last section of this paper I would like to suggest a different reading of this issue, a reading which, however, is perfectly compatible with the first I gave.

My suggestion is that the formal and abstract character of the temporality of gender performativity is a distinctive feature of the process of the construction of gender and sexual identities in advanced capitalist countries. In other words, while Butler herself does not explicitly recognise this relation, the ritualistic character of gender performance, this spatialisation of an empty time that takes place in the forced repetition of stylising acts, is mediated by the pervasiveness of abstract time given by the diffusion of the commodity form. For Marx, abstract labour time is the indifferent, homogenous time measured by the clock and crystallised in constant capital, commodities and money, in contrast with the individual, concrete labour time, filled with a specific content.55 This abstract, linear, calculable time, measured through clocks and chronometers, and that in turn measures labour, expands its kingdom well beyond the walls of workplaces, and increasingly regulates also leisure time, through the mediation of commodities.

Floyd emphasises precisely this aspect, when he insists that the performative character of masculinity in the US within the Fordist regime of capitalist accumulation is the outcome of a series of prescribed behaviours and patterns of consumption within a leisure time rigidly regulated by the commodity form. He compares these performative acts to a sort of ‘skilled labour’ performed during leisure time. This skilled labour consists of visible behaviours enacted within the sphere of consumption and therefore mediated through commodities, a skilled labour producing both masculinity and the ontological illusion of a masculinity pre-existing this production. It is in consumption, then, that a coherent definition of what it is to be a man is articulated. The fact that masculinity is performed particularly within the sphere of consumption, however, does not entail that these performative acts are the outcome of individual and consumerist free choices: on the contrary, the commodity form not only organises and abstracts the temporality of

leisure time, but gives a fundamental disciplinary character to consumption itself.\footnote{Floyd 2009, pp. 94–119.} In this sense, it would perhaps be less ambiguous and more effective to situate gender performativity within the sphere of circulation, rather than within that of mere consumption. Doing this, for example, would allow taking into account a wider set of phenomena, all contributing to the reification of sexual identities. If we refer to circulation instead of consumption, we can address the stylisation of certain kinds of labour which are key to the sphere of circulation (selling commodities and services, for example) or the way in which striving towards the realisation of value (finding markets for the commodities produced) contributes to the creation not only of new needs, but also of new desires.

While Floyd focuses only on the construction of masculinity in the US during the Fordist regime of accumulation, in contrast with the definition of manhood characteristic of the nineteenth century, his argument can be expanded to comprise gender performativity as such. Butler’s specific description of performativity grasps the character of the construction of gender – as identified with the object of sexual-desire choice and regulated by normative heterosexuality – as it is given within a historically specific period of capitalist accumulation within advanced capitalist countries. Rosemary Hennessy and Kevin Floyd have pointed out the link between the reification of heterosexuality into an identity and the reification implied by commodity production between the end of nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.\footnote{Hennessy 2000, pp. 97–103; Floyd 1998.} They both argue that the shift to sexual object of desire-choice as the defining feature of sexual identity is related to the dissolving impact of capital on the network of kinship and on traditional social ties. On the one hand, the process of capitalist accumulation, by reshaping the division of labour, by massively employing females in the labour-force, by generalising the consumption of commodities, induces a crisis of traditional patriarchal structures and relations, and therefore potentially blurs the boundaries between sexual identities and gender identities. I would add that the decoupling of sex and reproduction has comprised a fundamental contribution to this process. On the other hand, capitalism does contribute to the persistence of a gendered division of labour, including that of the reproduction of the labour-force, and it contributes to reshaping gender identities and securing their stability through heteronormativity, \textit{i.e.}, by normatively fusing gender identity with object of sexual-desire choice. In other words, it is undeniable that capital has a dissolving capacity that, applied to gender hierarchy, to
kinship relations and particularly to forms of reproduction of the material life that are grounded in kinship relations, might lead to their overall overcoming. The other side of the coin, however, is that this is only one of the constitutive tendencies of capital, as capital does constantly reproduce gender identities and hierarchies, preserving the hierarchical division of genders and at the same time deeply reshaping what is meant by gender identity.\textsuperscript{58} Performativity is a response to the new instability of gender and sexual identities produced by the dissolving tendencies of capital: as these are always potentially put in question within capitalist production, their very unstable stability is secured through performativity, in other words, through the continuous, theatrical repetition over time of normative discursive acts and social practices. In this way they become part of the conceptual organisation of time carried out by capital.

Not only the reification of sexual identities, but also the very process through which this reification takes place, \textit{i.e.} the repetition over time of their enactment, can be understood as a part of a capitalist totality, inasmuch as one understands the latter as a conceptual organisation of time and as an ensemble of social relations and practices. This totality, however, is a ‘self-moving’ one. In other words, it is never stably given, but must perform itself again and again through constant repetitions over time. The perspective of temporality and performativity, in conclusion, illuminates the fundamental imbrications between objectification and repetition or reproduction that characterise both capital and gender in advanced capitalist countries.

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\textsuperscript{58} For an articulation of this point, see, for example, Gimenez 1997.
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