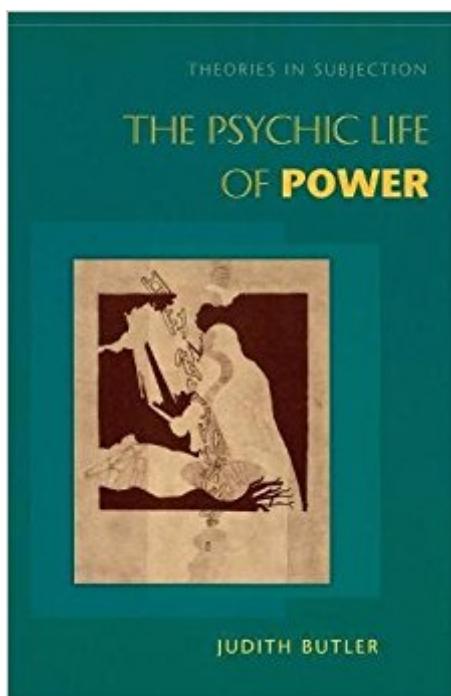


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# The Psychic Life Of Power: Theories In Subjection



## Synopsis

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what "one" is, one's very formation as a subject, is dependent upon that very power is quite another. If, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, it provides the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire. Power is not simply what we depend on for our existence but that which forms reflexivity as well. Drawing upon Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Althusser, this challenging and lucid work offers a theory of subject formation that illuminates as ambivalent the psychic effects of social power. If we take Hegel and Nietzsche seriously, then the "inner life" of consciousness and, indeed, of conscience, not only is fabricated by power, but becomes one of the ways in which power is anchored in subjectivity. The author considers the way in which psychic life is generated by the social operation of power, and how that social operation of power is concealed and fortified by the psyche that it produces. Power is no longer understood to be "internalized" by an existing subject, but the subject is spawned as an ambivalent effect of power, one that is staged through the operation of conscience. To claim that power fabricates the psyche is also to claim that there is a fictional and fabricated quality to the psyche. The figure of a psyche that "turns against itself" is crucial to this study, and offers an alternative to describing power as "internalized." Although most readers of Foucault eschew psychoanalytic theory, and most thinkers of the psyche eschew Foucault, the author seeks to theorize this ambivalent relation between the social and the psychic as one of the most dynamic and difficult effects of power. This work combines social theory, philosophy, and psychoanalysis in novel ways, offering a more sustained analysis of the theory of subject formation implicit in such other works of the author as *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Judith Butler's writing has become a cornerstone of queer theory. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, she drew upon Freud, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan to explore the connections between sex, politics, and identity, and *The Psychic Life of Power* continues her inquiry into these ideas. While she revisits, and revises, some of her earlier thoughts--such as her theory of gender as performance--she breaks much new ground here. Using Hegel and Nietzsche (as well as a critique of psychoanalysis) for theoretical support, Butler probes how the idea of "subjection"--to become a subject, to have a consciousness--interfaces with having a gay or lesbian identity. Discussing such topics as drag, gays-in-the-military, and AIDS to illustrate her ideas, Butler manages to locate her philosophical theories in a concrete world, and although her earlier work could sometimes be as dense as it was rewarding, *The Psychic Life of Power* is lucid and highly readable. --Michael Bronski

"The emergence of self-consciousness is rooted in paradoxâ•for becoming a subject is intricately bound up with being subjected. This insight . . . is explored and developed as [Butler's] book unfolds, taking the reader through a tour de force of its rhetorical, linguistic, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and social and political implications." (Modern Psychoanalysis)

I was drawn to interpellation. Althusser had written something about interpellation in *The Spectre of Hegel* and Judith Butler's book *The Psychic Life of Power* is a scholarly analysis of interpellation as a therapeutic result of trying to put intertextual meaning on the language people have been captured by when they feel a self being imposed upon themselves by a social order. I wonder about collapse of shambolic disorder when people think I'm too smart to tell them anything about this kind of theory. This book is based so much on Hegel and Lacan that modern philosophy can mulch these words into concepts for psychotic multiplicities, but there is no unity in subjects who get split with being alive in a song by Pearl Jam called *Alive*. Take a look. You know where, under where, or underwear on or off, take your pick.

I've read this book three times in the past several months in preparation for giving a talk on

post-structural perspectives on early childhood gender and sexual development in psychoanalysis. As always, I find the effort it takes to understand Butler's writing to pay off richly in the brilliance of her arguments. In particular, I was drawn to two sections in this book: the first a reconsidering of who it is that turns to become a subject in Althusser's model of interpellation, and the second an exchange of papers with psychoanalyst Adam Phillips in which both grapple with how her work might be informed by psychoanalytic practice and the practice might be informed by her work. Having read this book both prior to and after immersing myself in Freud, Lacan and some of their major commentators, I found that I got far more out of Butler's book with a stronger background in the language and assumptions of psychoanalysis.

In *\*The Psychic Life of Power\** Judith Butler provides a critical inquiry into the process of subject formation that reveals the self-conscious subject as necessary paradox. Her main argument is that the emergence of the subject depends on subjection to power and yet the subject that is inaugurated exceeds this power, because subjection can never fully totalize the subject. In order to elaborate her theoretical movements Butler draws on Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, Althusser, and Freud. The main metaphors for understanding the works of subjection are the turning of the subject on itself and the interpellation of the subject by the other. Consciousness and desire function as guiding categories for the analysis. Taking on the much discussed question of the possibility of agency Butler shows that the normalizing effect of social norms always produces an inassimilable remainder in the subject from where resistance against those norms becomes possible. *\*The Psychic Life of Power\** provides a very powerful rethinking of the question of subjectivity and self-consciousness, even though - or maybe because of - the individual chapters' appearance as separate essays. In the introduction, however, Butler reveals how the various explorations all fit together in her thinking. A new stage of Butlerian lucidity - in and on Butlerian terms, though.

This Butler is her best yet. It is imaginative, provocative, and excellently argues. She moves through a number of theories and discourses including Althusser, Freudian psychoanalysis, Foucault, and Hegel in order to argue out a VERY important concept: passionate attachments. This concept of Butler's represents a major intervention and contribution for radical politics. The basic idea is the subjects becomes attached to the conditions of their own subjectivity EVEN if these conditions are oppressive one. Very interesting and suggestive point. This book is well worth the buy just to see how Butler will argue this point out. If I have one criticism of Butler is that her discussion ultimately resonates with a number of Lacanian concepts, but she still maintains her skeptical distance from

Lacan--these Lacanian criticisms can be found in Zizek's excellent "The Ticklish Subject."

This is a continuation from her earlier publications, "Gender Trouble," "Bodies That Matter." Those who read these two texts would find this book extremely interesting. Butler seems to move her theorization of subjectivity from the materiality of the body (in previous texts) to the psychic realm of subjectivity. Please note that this is NOT a reflection of Cartesian dichotomy of mind/body. Rather, I understand her move as strategic choice, in order to deepen her analysis of power and its relation to psychic realm, before delving into the inextricable reality of psyche and body. Here Butler draws on the works of various philosophers, such as Hegel, Althusser, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault and so on, to explicate the complex process through which power engenders a psychic form (see intro), and constitutes a self. As always, her eloquent rhetorical style and brilliant epistemological turns are amazing enough.

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