

# Was Judith Butler Right to Refuse Berlin Award?

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**D**ECLARING that she must distance herself “from this complicity with racism,” Judith Butler publicly rejected the 2010 Civil Courage Award at Berlin’s Gay Pride Celebrations, known in Germany as Christopher Street Day or CSD. This decision by one of today’s preeminent intellectuals provoked a scandal, but two factors prevented her statement from having its full effect: a reference to commercialism that sidetracked the mainstream press reception; and an insufficient explanation for the charge of racism.

On Friday, June 18th, Judith Butler, author of such foundational works in queer theory as *Gender Trouble*, gave a lecture called “Queer Alliances and Anti-War Politics” to a sold-out crowd at the historic Volksbühne. Speaking in German, she outlined a queer leftist political agenda based on an enhanced understanding of human rights. All humans must have the right to participate fully in public life, to live freely, and express themselves without fear on the streets. These rights apply to transsexuals in Turkey—but also to burqa-clad women in France.

Tellingly, Butler’s positive example was Turkey, where she witnessed alliances between feminist groups and queer groups, while her negative example was France, where in her opinion feminist and queer groups were ganging up on minority women. For Butler, the West clearly doesn’t have all the right answers when it comes to the politics of gender and sexuality. Butler asserts that queer people are at an important fork in the road: they can allow themselves to be co-opted by a culture that claims moral superiority over Islam, or they can forge alliances with oppressed minority groups.

At the Brandenburg Gate the next day, Renate Künast, a leader of Germany’s progressive Green Party, presented Butler the Civil Courage Award at the conclusion of the Christopher Street Day parade, one of the world’s largest pride celebrations. Sensationally, Butler declined to accept it. In addition to charging complicity with racism, she expressed concern that queer people were being “instrumentalized by those who want to wage wars, i.e. cultural wars against migrants by means of forced Islamophobia and military wars against Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Her message failed to have the impact that it could have had for two reasons.

First, Butler made a passing reference to commercialism in her rejection speech. The initial wire reports from the German Press Agency (DPA) picked up exclusively on this point and declared that she had declined the prize because Christopher Street Day was too commercial and superficial. This standard complaint is presumably what German reporters wanted to hear, rather than what Butler actually said. In this context, “superficial” means that the event is an apolitical party where people dance and drink too much. But the very fact that gay people can celebrate in public is itself a political phenomenon worth supporting.

At the same time, if the claim that the parade is apolitical

gets traction, CSD could lose its status as a political demonstration, which would require the organizers to assume many of the prohibitively expensive security and clean-up costs currently borne by the city.

Regarding commercialism, the complaint is that companies like IKEA sponsor floats merely to prove their tolerance. But employees who struggle within corporations to improve their GLBTQ records and even organize floats at gay pride festivals are doing fine-tuned work to make life more queer-friendly. It’s not glamorous, but it is part of a radical grassroots change in society that deserves the chance to celebrate and be celebrated.

The claim that the parade is too commercial and superficial is easy both to admit and to dismiss. Readers can nod, shrug and ask why it was necessary to bring in such a highly regarded intellectual to make such a banal observation.

Racism, however, which was Butler’s primary concern, is a much more difficult accusation to accept. Butler did not help audiences process the charge of racism with her curiously unsupported claims. It was not clear whether she was objecting to an overall trend in Europe and the West or to specific events at the Berlin gay pride.

SUSPECT, a Berlin-based group of Queer and Trans of Color Activists, quickly released a press statement lauding Butler’s action. It claimed that the increasing xenophobia of the gay community is “by no small measure the fruit of the work of homonationalist organizations like the Lesbian and Gay Federation Germany and the gay helpline Manco.” The press release refers to “media campaigns that repeatedly present migrants as ‘archaic,’ ‘patriarchal,’ ‘homophobic,’ violent and unassimilable.” However, SUSPECT’s account gave no specific examples of these media campaigns or times when gay rights organizations have contributed to xenophobia.

Discussion on the Internet helped fill in some of the gaps. Jasbir Puar, author of *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, described the turn of events as the product of “a tremendous amount of last-minute, frenetic labor” by local queer groups of color. Jan Feddersen, a journalist for Berlin’s leftwing alternative paper, *die taz*, argued in print against Butler and her supporters. He became a target of specific criticism, as he has both served as a political coordinator of the CSD and written on the integration of Turkish immigrants into German society.

Butler’s intervention against Islamophobia served as a polemic. It should engender some soul-searching about racism in the minds of the mainstream gay community. A mindset that implies that foreigners and immigrants are responsible for homophobia certainly exists throughout Europe and the US. Nonetheless, if Butler had been more explicit about which ads and statements caused her to reject the award, her provocation might have changed more hearts and minds.

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