

The Value of Science Writing for Our Times

Judith Butler / Dirk Schulz

Als Beitrag zum Wissenschaftstag [#4genderstudies 2020](#) veröffentlicht der blog interdisziplinäre geschlechterforschung ein Gespräch von Judith Butler und Dirk Schulz, Geschäftsführer von [GeStiK](#), Gender Studies in Köln. Unter dem Titel "[There's no back to normal](#)" bildete ihr Austausch den Auftakt zur aktuellen Vortragsreihe der GeStiK zum Thema „Krise“. Da in diesem Gespräch auch Fragen skizziert wurden, die sich auf die anhaltenden Angriffe auf – bis hin zu Verboten von – Gender Studies überall in der Welt beziehen, stimmte Judith Butler einer redaktionellen Bearbeitung für den gender-blog zu. Dies ist der erste Teil des Gesprächs.

Dirk Schulz Thank you so much for your time, Judith, and for this opportunity to have a conversation on questions of “crisis” suggested by but not necessarily limited to the current pandemic. What I currently witness in Germany is the urgent desire to master a situation and to go “back to normal” as quickly as possible. As if corona signified first and foremost a disturbance of “the ordinary and normal” and the foremost goal was to regain power, control and order quickly. There is an evident longing for somebody to be in charge of the situation. I’ve been thinking about the role of science in this. I don’t know what the situation is like in the US, but in Germany I see that now a lot of scientists do get attention, are being invited and heard and figure as the experts, expected to be able to tell us what to do in order to be safe and correct. As the pandemic continues to spread, much disappointment and disillusionment has been articulated in public, the media and in political debates. Because it has become very obvious now that scientists – “even” from the natural and medical sciences – are not certain, definite, fixing, knowing, authoritative. After all, this is a new situation for everyone and research has only started, so assumptions and findings may challenge or even contradict one another. And it seems that instead of accepting science to be this ongoing, changing, fluid, plural process of knowledge production and exchange the current unreliability and uncertainty appears to deflate the authority of science in more general and worrying terms here.

Judith Butler Well, it’s extremely interesting and maybe this is a moment to reflect on the differences between German and US political cultures because although I understand what you are saying, I have a different perspective. It’s always worrisome when there is an expert class telling us what is true and what is not and we are supposed to receive that knowledge and not question it and they act as if they are the new leaders. They are not elected, so it is not exactly a democratic situation. It can be very paternalistic. At the same time in the US during the Trump regime, one of our deepest problems is the popular skepticism about science, the not-believing in science, not believing in epidemiology, research, testing. This has been very dangerous. As you know, we have a president (leaving soon) who lives in a fantasy world who makes proclamations about what is true and what is not and seems to have full disdain for scientific research and its protocols. And he is supported by an evangelical base, a constituency that also believes that science ought not to usurp the authority of God. They are waging a pre-enlightenment battle of religion against science.

Science is a dynamic process

So the researchers who do know the science and are following the research and are developing anti-virals and vaccines have to fight to have their findings known and accepted as legitimate. And of course even among those who approach science within a more secular framework are also troubled by the fact that scientists don't always agree on how to think about this virus or these kinds of illnesses and the paradigms are changing as they learn more. This should not be surprising, if you consider how science works. It does change its paradigms as it is faced with more information and often has to rethink its premises in light of what it finds. I mean, you see that science is an active process of sorting information and revising theories accordingly. It's a dynamic process. It's not the ultimate authority that has all answers at once. It cannot furnish the ethical and political guidelines for how to live in common. And yet, if we seek to live in common without taking science into account, the results are disastrous, as we are seeing. Perhaps we should be glad that scientists disagree and that they ask each other for proof that they come up with new conceptual paradigms. This is one way that scientific understanding advances.

Peer-reviewed articles let us see the workings of science. It becomes less mystified for those outside the field, and I think it becomes more reliable because when you follow the case that is made to defend a theory against those who are skeptical: There are key questions to which scientists have to answer: What evidence do you have? What is your demonstration? During this time, I am also enormously grateful to science writers who, I think, are the future because they take that complex information about proteins and RNA and viral vectors and make it available to those of us who are not specialists. I feel like that's an incredibly important public function, and I am grateful to them.

Absolutely. However, I am not sure whether I agree with your positive or let's say optimistic view of Germany's engagement with or, even, embrace of science. What I observe is this: at the beginning of the crisis scientists were invited to the debate because of a widely shared expectation that they would know what is happening, would know how to direct the situation. Their whole authority was built upon that expectation. But when it became increasingly apparent that some of the first premises were "wrong" or at least could not deny the force and unknown aspects of this pandemic, their authority – science as authority and certainty – was questioned. Coming from gender and literary/cultural studies there are obviously those so-called soft sciences that are not taken too seriously or, in the case of gender studies, are even rather attacked because of their allegedly missing "objectivity" or scientific "purity", their apparent entanglement with politics and social movements. So I think it is interesting that now also the natural sciences have come under critical public scrutiny which may hopefully lead to a broader discussion on the role, expectations, possibilities and limitations of science as a whole. Evidently epidemiologists and physicians cannot come up with an immediate solution now, the truth and the facts. They cannot provide instant means and orders to end this for us. Indeed the whole "crisis" brings up the intertwining of many areas – and scientific knowledges – often considered distinct: medical, socio-cultural, political, ethical and juridical perspectives all need to be taken into account. But a lot of people voice their disappointment, even anger that scientists seem to disagree. I mean, exactly what you just described is, I guess, our daily working experience. We know that we can disagree, we can have controversies, can have different concepts, ideas and approaches. But for many to not take on that role of authority is a reason to be disappointed in and mistrust science.

Yes, I understand, but that disappointment depends on an idea of science as ultimate authority and that it speaks with full knowledge and in an unequivocal way all at once, right? That's an attribution of ultimate authority to science. That may well be a different way where religion and science intersect, where the absolute authority of the one becomes, through secularization, the absolute authority of the second. They've taken their religious desire for sudden full explanation and prescription and transferred it onto science. But I am not seeing that right now. If anything, science confesses all the time to what it does not know and cannot see. A scientist can tell us to wear a mask not to infect others or be infected, but that advice will only make sense within an ethical framework in which we are disposed to care about each other's well-being. It would be a mistake to look to researchers or medical

people to give us that ethical framework. I mean, we can take the information they give us but it is not the same as the answer to a political, ethical, and cultural question such as, how do we make and sustain communities of care? How do we make and sustain modes of knowledge circulation so that we can become an informed public and understand the controversies? What is new about this situation? Why it is so hard to understand? It is only understood in certain kinds of steps. In other words we can become empowered as non-experts precisely by not expecting science to tell us how to act. It can tell us what the situation is and make recommendations – masks, social distancing and sometimes confinement – but then we have to figure how to live in confinement, how to continue to support each other in confinement, how to empower ourselves so that we learn more about science and can make certain judgements on our own that are based on a good reading of our common immunological predicament, right? Few things are more important than scientific literacy to counteract the fatal consequences of ignoring science during our time.

A symptom has to be narrated

One reason why I love science writers is because they have developed a reading and translation practice. They are reading scientific material and seeking to explain them to a popular audience. Some of us trained in literary criticism might also note that scientists also use incredible figures. I mean corona virus. What is that? Corona is a crown. There is a massive metaphor in this. It is a crown with spikes, right? Corona! And somehow it's a Spanish crown. It comes from the "Golden Age" or it is derived from an astronomical formation? Who knew? There is a phantasmatic dimension in scientific writing that is also interesting to see. Even as processes of viral transmission are described that rely on causal or perhaps sequential steps, narratives emerge seeking to recapitulate the understanding of how the virus spreads, and rhetorical strategies emerge to make clear to a popular audience how best to understand some rather complex processes.

The field of narrative medicine is concerned with how narratives work in both, medical research and treatment, how stories work in the medical office, starting with the problem of how to narrate the pain that one is in, the development of a symptom. You cannot understand what is going on with somebody – somebody walks into an office, they give a story about their pain, their ailment, their suffering and that story has to be listened to and interpreted. There have to be questions about that story to discern the missing steps, but all this points to a deep dependence on narrative and metaphor within medicine more broadly. And that doesn't make science fake or false. Not at all. It means only that a symptom has to be narrated; a diagnosis or prognosis has to be communicated, and that we are in an interlocutory scene where language is crucial to the success of the project. It also raises profound ethical and linguistic questions: how does a practitioner speak to someone who speaks another language and may have another idea of medical practice? How do practitioners relate not just to the diagnosis, but to the person in front of them who must hear and understand the diagnosis, and who may well be fearing for their own lives. I think what it shows us is that the humanities and science are intertwined in ways that are really important.

But, you know, for me in the US the skepticism towards science in the name of religion has fueled widespread denial about the seriousness of COVID-19. There is not only an evangelical skepticism towards science but also a deeply ignorant set of convictions that range from superstition to conspiracies, fantastical theories. There is a kind of cultural paranoia that stops people from actually engaging in practices that would secure each other's health. So this skepticism of science belongs to the larger trend of anti-intellectualism that allows Trump's many lies and falsehoods to circulate. As you can see, I think that some responses to so-called expert culture are actually self-defeating and dangerous.

Yeah, absolutely! And I think it is striking to see how religion, maybe in Germany at least, doesn't play that much of a role as such but there remains that search or hope for somebody to guide and help us through. There appears to be a deep-seated unwillingness to take

responsibility for ourselves. So somebody else has to take that responsibility and master the situation for us. So in a way the question rather seems to be what or who could replace religion? I think it is very interesting what you say about narratives. It is very important who tells which story and how those stories are told, which words are used and become meaningful in or as discourse. I mean there is a heated debate, obviously not least fueled or let us say popularized by Trump, of whether we are living now in times of “post-truth”, “fake news” and “conspiracy theories”. How would you describe means to differentiate between, well, these terms and their worrisome implications and I guess the notion that ... we can acknowledge ambiguity and uncertainty, admit that we do not know for sure or at least will never find ultimate truths or the universal truths of something. Do you have ideas about that?

Yes, I think many of these public discourses are themselves very confused. I mean ... it's clear that when we go to a medical office and we want to be properly diagnosed, we also feel like we are entitled to have good information and a proper diagnosis. And if we are misdiagnosed we are legitimately angry and even sometimes compelled to engage in a lawsuit if the consequences of the misdiagnosis are severe. I certainly have experienced that, not for myself but for a friend who died because she was misdiagnosed for about two and a half years. And by the time that the right diagnosis did come, it was too late to treat her and she died. So in that case false information communicated to her was a life-and-death issue. There is no question about that. Now to say that she deserved to have a good diagnosis and that there is a good diagnosis as opposed to a bad one means that she needed a diagnosis that is right. That hardly means we subscribe to some theological notion of absolute truth. However, I would insist talking about truth we need to think about the conditions under which we make truth claims, but I am not interested in destroying the idea of truth. Not at all.

And these are important scenes and that's also true in the sphere of law and it's also true in the sphere of literature. I mean, if somebody comes into my class and tells me that Kafka's story is about something that it really isn't and they are having a lovely daydream of their own, I invariably say “show me in the text where this occurs”. And they sputter and respond: “I haven't really read the text or I thought it was in the text or I can't find...” I mean, they don't have evidence for their claim. So I believe that we need to have evidence for the claims we make and that there are better claims and worse claims depending on the evidence that we can muster. Similarly, for those who make claims about truth, they have to demonstrate their claim through arguments that can, or would be, accepted by others. Otherwise we are left with dogmatism or superstition.

Truth must be presented in order to be known as truth

I have never been anti truth. I've never thought that we should oppose the idea of truth. I just think there are conditions under which truth presents itself. It's not a new idea. You know, it's like an ordinary Kantian proposition that truth must be presented in order to be known as truth. Well, then, we have to ask, how is it presented? I am not saying that truth is fabricated – no, I am saying that it depends on certain kinds of presentations, contexts, rules that organize the appearance of those truth domains and we do rely on them. We rely on them, quite frankly, for life and death issues. So I do not think I understand those who oppose “Truth” with a capital T... I'm not always sure what exactly they're saying. I guess what they are saying is that they don't want a single system of truth to tell them how things are. Perhaps they would prefer to live in a world in which there are competing truths or where truth is sought through different means and truth is considered as an open ended pursuit. And it seems settled in certain cases, in certain ways but it's not an absolute concept that covers all cases and all domains. This leads us to a broader question about how truth appears in history and across cultures, but I cannot develop this here.

Presently, it could not be more important to ask what counts as evidence and how the selection of evidence leads us to certain kinds of conclusions. There is always a moment in which the sphere of evidence is delimited, right? So if you are an immunologist you look at it one way, if you are an

epidemiologist you look at it another way, if you are a geneticist you look at it another way, and sometimes those spheres speak to one another and sometimes they don't and that really makes a difference. Collaborative work among fields tends to provide a fuller picture. That is true in the humanities and social sciences as well.

So there also has to be a kind of translation mechanism among spheres of science in order to get broader pictures and I think we are constantly doing that. If we were to ask, for instance, how does ecology, the problem of ecology, intersect with the problem of race many people would say: "Oh, but these are two different topics". Well, maybe not, maybe environmental toxins affect Black and Brown people in this world disproportionately and we can talk about environmental racism. That notion brought at least two spheres together in a new way and that was an illumination, a new field of research and public policy.

I want to use the word "truth" when I say, for instance, that something more truthful can be said, can be pointed to, and in that moment in which we bear witness or transcend prejudice, or name an historical reality that has been long disavowed. At such moments we are able to overcome limitations on knowledge that restrict our ability to see and understand in consequential ways.

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