

## Chapter 1

### TRANSFORMING BUTLER'S THEORY

In this chapter the theoretical groundwork that informs this dissertation is discussed in some detail. In the first section I present the central aspects of Butler's theory of performative construction of identity. As I mentioned in the introduction, Butler's theory was originally designed to map female *individual* identity construction. For this reason, and since there have been few studies on the transference of the features of individual identity into the area of *national* identity, it is necessary to show that it is theoretically plausible to make such a move. In the second section I engage the main argument of this chapter which is that a version of Butler's theory of performative construction can be plausibly and fruitfully applied to the construction of something collective such as national identity. Acknowledging that Butler herself might not agree, I argue that the theoretical links between Butler's subject matter and national identity are strong enough to permit a wider application of her theory than perhaps she originally thought. In the third section I extend this argument further by introducing a reading of Benedict Anderson's views on 'imagined communities', concentrating on his notion of 'nationness' which is particularly useful for my purposes. By the end of this chapter I hope to have depicted a coherent theoretical outline of the performative theory of national identity construction enhanced by a further understanding of 'nationness'. This theoretical frame will then be carried forward to chapters two and three, where I will apply its key facets to the Japanese case, beginning with its historical dimension.

### ***1. Butler's theory***

As a theorist focusing on gender studies, throughout her work Judith Butler challenges the belief that certain gendered behaviors are natural. Her argument is that they are conventional and reproduced through patterns of behavior and perception that are learned. She illustrates the ways that one's learned performance of what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity is an act of types, a performance that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality.<sup>1</sup>

Mainly during the development of her theory of performative construction of identity, Butler states the uncertainty of the extent to which we can assume that a given individual can be said to constitute him- or herself. She speculates to what extent our acts are instead determined for us by our place within language and convention, our social contexts and also the institutions around us.<sup>2</sup> She follows postmodernist and poststructuralist practice in using the term "subject", rather than "individual" or "person", in order to underline the linguistic nature of our position within what Jacques Lacan terms the 'symbolic order'. That is, the system of signs and conventions that determines our perception of what we see as reality.<sup>3</sup>

Butler argues that it is the very act of performing gender repeatedly which constitutes who we are. For Butler, identity itself is therefore an illusion retroactively created by our performances. "In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Dino Felluga, "Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex," *North American Conference on British Studies*, Vancouver, Canada, October 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Felluga, "Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex."

<sup>3</sup> Felluga, "Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex."

compelling illusion, an object of *belief*.”<sup>4</sup> In this case, the belief in stable identities and gender differences is, in fact, the result of both subtle and deliberate coercions. By coercions such as “social sanction and taboo”<sup>5</sup> humans construct a belief in ‘natural’ behavior. It is considered ‘natural’, for example, for girls in some societies to be tender and for boys to display physical and emotional strength. However, Butler argues that such character traits and the behaviors they lead to are, in fact, not natural but socially constructed and socially enforced, through the repeated performance of the behaviors. By underlining the artificial, proscribed, and performative nature of gender identity, Butler seeks to ‘trouble’ the definition of gender through challenging the status quo in order to fight for the rights of marginalized identities, such as gay and lesbian identity.<sup>6</sup>

Butler’s theory goes even further by questioning the very distinction between gender and sex. Conventionally, feminists accepted the fact that certain anatomical differences do exist between men and women, but pointed out how most of the conventions that determine the behaviors are, in fact, *social* gender constructions that have little or nothing to do with our corporeal sexes.<sup>7</sup> According to traditional feminists, sex is a biological category while gender is a historical category.<sup>8</sup> Butler questions that distinction by arguing that our “gender acts” affect us in such material, corporeal ways that even our perception of corporeal sexual differences are affected by social conventions.<sup>9</sup> For Butler, sex is not “a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but... a

---

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990), 271.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 271.

<sup>6</sup> Felluga, “Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex.”

<sup>7</sup> Felluga, “Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex.”

<sup>8</sup> Felluga, “Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex.”

<sup>9</sup> Felluga, “Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex.”

*cultural* norm which governs the materialization of bodies.”<sup>10</sup> Sex, for Butler, “is an ideal construct which is compulsorily materialized through time. In other words, it is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.”<sup>11</sup> The initial conclusion relevant to my study is that things that are thought to be rooted in corporeal or physical differences may not be as rooted there as we think. And if they are not so rooted, then they might not be as unchangeable either.

A large part of Butler’s study of women, and the bases of the theory of performative construction of identity, was strongly influenced by Foucault’s genealogical analysis, previously inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s work. According to Butler, Foucault approaches this issue investigating the political interests that exist in designating the ‘origin’ or ‘causes’ of the categories of identity.<sup>12</sup> As is well known, Foucault concluded that those categories are in fact an effect of the institutions, practices and discourses around them. For him, “genealogy is history written in accordance to the commitment to the issues of the present moment.”<sup>13</sup> This idea is explained through Foucault’s writings about madness, discipline and punishment and the history of sexuality. In the first case for example, Foucault maps the discontinuity in the history of madness according to different eras. He explains how the transformations to madness changed from a view of simple lack of sanity or reason (in the middle of the seventeenth century) to the view that madness is a

---

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 29.

<sup>13</sup> John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers from Structuralism to Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 112.

mental illness that requires medicalization (nineteenth century).<sup>14</sup> According to Foucault, the later medicament and interment of mad persons came as a response not to medical advances, but to the concern of the French Revolution toward individual rights. This was accompanied by the transformation of the asylum into a space of therapeutic practices instead of a place of punitive actions.<sup>15</sup> *The History of Sexuality* follows a similar line. Foucault analyses by the use of genealogy the changes in sexual behavior. He explains these changes within the context of a network of moral, political and economic practices. His conjecture is that the mentioned practices are fundamental to the construction of the identity. This is because of its influence in the production, government and care of the self.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the parts of Foucault's analysis are of fundamental importance to this study, since they represent the bases of the production of identity in any of its forms.

The mentioned network of moral, political and economic practices is in our contemporary world defined by a structure of institutions and norms. This originated the idea of defining institutions, which shape practices and therefore our identity. The idea of defining institutions is retaken and analyzed further by Butler. This might be one of the most important clues that the theory of performative construction of identity can provide for this thesis, since the examination of different spheres of society opens the way to investigating the productive effect of institutions, as well as the process itself.<sup>17</sup> The initiative gives the basic premises for the possibility of understanding institutions as a factory producing national subjects.

---

<sup>14</sup> Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 29.

To explain how this idea can be possible, I should clarify how institutions create subjects. A person becomes intelligible in the sense of its identity only when it adjusts itself to the recognizable structures, norms and practices of that identity.<sup>18</sup> The general point is found in the structuralist thought of, for example Louis Althusser<sup>19</sup> and Jean Piaget.<sup>20</sup> This philosophical tradition attempts to show that people comprehend better who they are when they become part of the structures, norms and traditions of their social system.<sup>21</sup> As exemplified by Butler, women become clearer of their distinctiveness when they become involved in feminist causes, or when they are familiarized with the mission and activities that they are expected to practice, such as becoming a housewife or taking the responsibility of educating their children while men provide the monetary necessities to the family. One of the most notable aspects of this idea is that the status individuals receive by their consciousness and familiarization with the conventions gives them the identity of the kind that they will be members of when politically represented.

In relation to this, Butler's theory describes that identity constitutes the subject for which it gains political *representation*. This representation can thus be understood as a functional term, by giving to the subjects their place in politics and by giving visibility and legitimacy to the subjects within their social context. This idea is denoted by the term 'normative' in Butler's theory.<sup>22</sup> The normative sense of representation is in charge of giving ethical justification, the establishment of an object, and the concrete consequences

---

<sup>18</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1979) and *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB Press, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> See Jean Piaget, *Structuralism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> See Emma R. Norman, *Ser Político* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Coyoacán, forthcoming 2005) chapter 2 for an introduction to the place of the subject in the work of Althusser, Foucault and Derrida and for a general discussion of the ideas I am referring to here.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

derived from it.<sup>23</sup> In other words, representation demarcates the limits of the identity of the subject, clarifying how it should be in order to be part of a kind. In this case, discriminating its characteristics obliges a subject to behave, look or appear as expected. Representation is also in charge of identifying which expressions of the individual are acceptable and which ones are not, illustrating what is ‘the normal’ and ‘the abnormal’.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, the context in which the subject develops is very important for normativity.<sup>25</sup> All its elements, including the social and political structure, have an impact in the construction and reaffirmation of the identity. What becomes remarkable in this specific part of the theory, is that the context establishes a need of the subjects to be politically represented, since this factor will give them not only legitimacy in the society, it will also elucidate the norms and limits of their being.

Going further into classical ideas of social constructivism, Butler claims that the spheres of linguistic and political representation define the criteria that give shape to subjects themselves.<sup>26</sup> She draws attention to an important relation between the representation and the recognition of the subject. Normative representation can be explained then as prerequisites set to the subject to produce, develop or reproduce itself before being represented.<sup>27</sup> In other words, individuals need to first perceive their own form and existence inside the limits of certain existing norms in order to be later represented by institutions as part of a kind. A homosexual in a community needs to understand himself as such and act in a particular way in order to be represented by a group working for gay rights, for example.

---

<sup>23</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

Butler bases her explanation on Foucault's similar idea in his explanation of the juridical systems of power.<sup>28</sup> Those systems *produce* the subjects they represent. Foucault explained how the social position of mentally ill people was changed by the institutions and also their place in the society and their own limits of transgression of 'normality'. In the Renaissance, madness was considered a source of wisdom, truth or political criticism, and the behavior of those persons was exalted on this basis. Later institutions gave different limits to mentally ill transgressions, either by segregation, medication or by hospitalization.<sup>29</sup> But the limits of the institutions of society go even further than that, since it is those institutions themselves that draw the limits of "unreason" and abnormality. In that sense, they decided who was insane or not, or what was the normal and abnormal. The subjects are therefore formed and defined by the structures created by the institutions of power.<sup>30</sup> And those institutions claim to represent or protect the subject, and allege in order to gain legitimacy of the use of power materialized in policies of exclusion.<sup>31</sup>

It is important then to understand women as a clear example of how the subject does not exist prior to the institutions of representation, or institutions of power, waiting to be represented. That clear example indicates for the purpose of this thesis, two important premises. First, that the subject is *produced* by the institutions that hold the power to represent it, and second, that statements of the existence of the subject *before* the representation is used an instrument to give legitimacy to the social contract.

We can also deepen our understanding of this idea through Butler's original explanation which concerns her notion of performativity. The initial point is found in

---

<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34. See also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane: 1977).

<sup>29</sup> Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers*, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

Derrida's interpretation of Kafka's *Before the Law*.<sup>32</sup> In that story, who waits for the law sits before the door of the law, and gives attributes of strength to the law that one is waiting for. The anticipation of a revelation is what gives authority to it. In other words, the anticipation conjures the object.<sup>33</sup> In that case, the expectation actually *produces* the phenomenon that it is anticipating. In the same way, an anticipation of the form of a certain subject, gives it attributes to represent, producing a subject according to the expectation. Performativity is, then, the explanation of those internal acts that we perceive as something we already possess but which are, in fact, something that we anticipate and produce by the repetition of certain acts.

So Butler argues that gender, as an objective natural thing, does not exist. "Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed."<sup>34</sup> Gender is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction. Therefore, because it is fictional, it is one that is open to change and contestation. "Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis."<sup>35</sup> That genesis is not corporeal but performative so that the body becomes its gender only "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 278.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 273.

<sup>36</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 274.

Performativity is much more than an act predetermined by culture, linguistics or institutions. It is the long term effect of these elements in our culture and everyday practices and values. The texture of our personality and our place in society is determined by a process that creates the repetition and the illusion of ‘normal’ behavior. Normative subjectivity, representation and performativity therefore cannot be understood as a single act, but a complex ritual that produces a temporal duration of identity that is culturally sustained.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. *Can Butler’s theory be applied to the construction of national identity?*

Judith Butler started to build her study of the performative construction of identity as a way to denaturalize what she calls ‘normative violence’ and as a way to enable us to fight against it.<sup>38</sup> She understood that the formation of the subject by normative means which seem to be natural, made humans vulnerable and constructed subjects without them being conscious of it. This thesis does not have the same goal, even though I find implicitly important the denaturalization of the normative production of the subject. I am much more interested in showing how this same theory and process can help in the construction of the nation state by producing national subjects artificially – that is, consciously.

The importance of Butler’s theory in relation to this thesis lies in the innovation of its conjectures and also in her insistent attempt to approach questions of the construction of subjective identity. She implied a number of times that the institutions of our contemporary nation states work by excluding and creating individuals, by the use of what she calls ‘normative violence’. This term means that because the norm established obliges us to

---

<sup>37</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 20.

follow certain ways and not others, it is a way of violence against the freedom of individuals, a silent but coercive measure to make us act inside the limits of others. A simple examination of Butler's theory makes us wonder if it is useful to understand the state as a cohesive actor that attempts to pull together several groups with distinct commonalities into its national policies. The reason for this is that normativity is a silent measure that can be inserted socially to force the limits and ways of society by the use of the kind of policies that have impact on our everyday lives and selves. In this case, the previously distant theory of performative construction of identity comes very close to the interests of International Relations by giving possible responses to issues such as the problems of multi ethnic nations. This provides the first step toward understanding a state as capable of artificially constructing a nation, commonality and belonging.

Butler's studies also encircle a number of inferences which can be applied in other spheres beyond the feminist approach through an alternative application of the theory she developed. Its premises can be applied not only in the case of sexually discriminated minorities, but also to any other group of human beings due to the extensive roots and significance in relations to other fields of social sciences, such as psychology, ethnography, or international relations. For that reason, it is important to analyze the plausibility of the transference of her theory from the individual into the collective, translating that collectivity into the national.

Butler's theory approaches the construction of gender identity, but not the construction of an identified collectivity. Butler even approached briefly the debate of the possibility of her theory being transferred into the racial realm. She concluded that is

unlikely that racial identity constructs itself the same way as gender.<sup>39</sup> Her argument here is nevertheless vague in its explanation, and is based on describing that all theories of construction are complementary.<sup>40</sup> However, it is not difficult to see certain connections that can permit the application of aspects of her theory in a context of collective identity.

For Lucian Pye, political identity was used to transfer identity in a metaphorical way from the individual to the collective.<sup>41</sup> Political identity can be explained as an effect of the social process of construction and sedimentation, bringing up the concept of social identity.<sup>42</sup> The interaction, and even the relation with power, made humans politically involved. Their unique goals regarding the systems of power made them also identify with others. But the idea of individuals having a sense of belonging to a group of certain particularities makes them also a part of a social group. In this case, the identity given by identification or interaction with others makes clear that it is socially constructed. So if identity “is a result of a social process of construction... [it] opens a possibility of a political contestation to and re-articulation of identity.”<sup>43</sup> This idea explains the possibility of collective identity being similar to the individual identity, concluding that it can be an object of the same effects and possibilities of construction and articulation. The basic point provides the possibility to transplant the features of individual identity into group identity, and to understand this construction as something collective and malleable.

Another reason to question Butler’s insistence that her theory only applies to gender identity concerns the similarities between gender differences and racial differences. Both differentiations are commonly perceived as rooted in the body. In both cases, differences

---

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1991, preface.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1991 preface.

<sup>41</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, “Identity, Political,” in *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*, eds. Paul Barry Clarke and Joe Foweraker (London: Routledge, 2001), 333.

<sup>42</sup> Stavrakakis, “Identity, Political,” 333.

<sup>43</sup> Stavrakakis, “Identity, Political,” 334.

are more importantly rooted in perception. Finally, we should consider that while Butler applies her theory to individual gender identity construction, women are a collective group who may not be mobilized collectively or politically, but have the potential to become so – as in the 60s, for example. If these arguments are valid, there appears to be insufficient reasons to persuade us that the theory of performative construction of identity cannot be applied to some forms of collective identity.

### 3. *Should Butler's theory be applied to national identity construction?*

Examining identity and understanding it as an object for possible re-articulation has assumed a central significance in contemporary postmodern studies along with exploring the distinction between the individual and the society, the problems of both and their relation.<sup>44</sup> Some of the central premises of postmodern studies are that language is not a tool to express ideas about reality, since the subject is “always-already”<sup>45</sup> embedded in a preexisting language structure; the questioning of the rational, transparent character of thought itself, the concepts of over determination and representation and feminist theories on the construction of the gendered subject by the means of preexisting historical and social conditions that determined the consciousness.<sup>46</sup>

The base of this transformation and construction of identity is the idea of subjectivity deeply studied by postmodernism. “Subjectivity is formed and transformed in a

---

<sup>44</sup> Jenny Edkins, “Politics, Subjectivity and Depoliticisation,” in Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 23. The most central theories associated with this approach can be found in the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and in some feminist thought.

<sup>45</sup> The term was originally used by Luis Althusser in his *Lenin and Philosophy*, 164. It has come to be a common notion in structuralist and poststructuralist discussions concerning the immersion of the subject within the social structures of the world – be that language/discourse as in Lacan and Derrida, or in institutions as in Foucault.

<sup>46</sup> Edkins, “Politics, Subjectivity, and Depoliticisation,” 24.

continuous process that takes place in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed and alongside the production or reproduction of the social.”<sup>47</sup> This topic decenters the subject and explains its identity construction. Judith Butler’s theory seems more compelling primarily because it is based not on subjectivity but in performativity. One reason for favoring performativity is that it is based in more concrete circumstances than the often highly abstracted discussions found in theories based on discussions of subjectivity found in, for example, Derrida. Moreover, performativity proves to be more fruitful when used to explain the collective development of identity. One of the reasons for this is that the contribution made by feminist, gender studies and ‘queer’ theory to the decentering of the subject seems to be more complete than in some postmodern approaches. Butler’s theory goes as far as challenging aspects never touched by others, considering the subject as disembodied, sexless, and gender-blind in character.<sup>48</sup> This is very significant for this thesis, since transcending the physical body is one of the challenges of states with multi ethnic groups. Butler states repeatedly that the body is not a central element for identity. Despite visual differences, individuals in fact develop their identity based on other elements of categorization. When individuals act in a certain way, they overcome the physical making it less important than behavior. What emerges from this insight is a particular element that provides a tool for understanding how a multi ethnic society can build cohesion of kind. The differences in physical aspect can be overcome, minimized and ignored, by placing the categorization on the way they act. Butler’s theory provides the theoretical framework in general terms that I aim to illustrate by the particular case of Japan: a multi ethnic, nationally identified society.

---

<sup>47</sup> Edkins, “Politics, Subjectivity, and Depoliticisation,” 24.

<sup>48</sup> Edkins, “Politics, Subjectivity, and Depoliticisation,” 31.

In addition to the above arguments I have made in favor of importing Butler's theory across the lines dividing gender studies from international relations studies, is the fact that two theorists have already attempted to do so in certain areas, although not in the specific area I wish to explore. Both David Campbell and Cynthia Weber have used the theoretical framework given by postmodern feminists, in particular using Butler. They use Butler's theory to explain the state as any other subject, and the elements that have impact in its construction. Campbell and Weber analyze different aspects of how state identities are acted out and constructed by their foreign policy. Campbell based his work on how state identity is constructed by the identification of enemies and Weber by examining how the sovereignty and intervention boundaries discursively construct the state.<sup>49</sup> Their understanding of Butler's theory and its application place the political identity of a state at the center of attention.

Extending recent debates in the fields of International Relations concerning identity and culture, Campbell shows how perceptions of danger and difference work to establish the identity of a country. Campbell affirms that understanding the performative construction of identity encourages a better understanding of the performative construction of the institutions of the state, and develops in his work examples of how foreign policy is implicated in the reproduction of state identity in the United States.<sup>50</sup> In *Writing Security*, Campbell argues that, far from being an expression of a given society, foreign policy constitutes state identity through the interpretation of danger posed by others. It is foreign policy, in his view, which creates the identity by differentiation practices and the modes of

---

<sup>49</sup> Alina Honsu, "Identity Politics and Narrativity," paper delivered at the Conference *'Narrative, Ideology, and Myth'*, Special Session: 'Narrating subjectivity and security in de-territorialized world: Narrative theorizing in peace research/IR today' (Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute and Department of Political Science and International Relations University of Tampere, 26-28 June 2003), 8.

<sup>50</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 9.

dealing with the foreign.<sup>51</sup> Campbell's work is of prime importance due to its detailed analysis of how American foreign policy has been rearticulating itself around the discovery of new enemies throughout its history stating that "[t]he constant articulation of danger though foreign policy is thus not a threat to a state's identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility."<sup>52</sup> Following Butler in some crucial respects, he shows how national identity at the state level is performed through acts, giving new avenues of opportunity in this topic.

The importance of Campbell's studies is not only derived from the exemplification of the use of Butler's theory in the fields of International Relations. Campbell gave a new significance to the normal/abnormal opposition given by Butler's theory by explaining the formation of identity of a country by the normativity of a national/foreign opposition. What primarily emerges from Campbell's work is the translation of Butler's ideas of 'normal' and 'abnormal' into 'national' and 'foreign'. Later in this thesis I take this idea even further, going from the single condition of national into an explanation of the performativity of nationness.

Cynthia Weber does something very similar to Campbell using the ideas of Butler. Weber is one of the most important postmodern authors using critical theory to explain our contemporary world order. In *Performative States* and in *Simulating Sovereignty*, she links the notion of performativity with many political topics concerning international relations. Like Campbell, Weber aims to decipher the constant construction of the state by the means of some type of action. She questions the legitimacy of the limits of intervention of the United States and addresses the importance of sovereignty as something that has to be performed parallel to intervention. Her most significant innovation is given in *Performative*

---

<sup>51</sup> Honsu, *Identity Politics and Narrativity*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell, *Writing Security*, 12.

*States*. Here she introduces performativity into international relations discussions in a way that emphasizes sex, gender, and sexuality. Weber returns to Butler's work as a way of reconsidering the sovereign nation state not only as a performative body, but also as a sex and gendered body that determines the performance of the population by the gendered institutions. However, even though her analysis is interesting in a literary way, I believe she is ambiguous in her explanations. She introduces the terms and conditions of performativity into international relations discourse, but her explanations are superficial and confusing. This problem makes unfruitful for us the ideas she exposes, beyond her attempt to transport Butler's theory to a different realm.

Cynthia Weber and David Campbell are important for this thesis because they confirm the usefulness and applicability of the theory of performative construction of identity in a different sphere, explaining the political identity of states and proving that this theory can be taken a step further. Their writings are extremely valuable for the innovation of the transference of the theory into the field of International Relations. Focusing purely on the performative effects of discourse on the political sphere of a state allows an illuminating insight into the possibilities of analyzing the state as any other subject. However, I wish to suggest that such an approach is not perhaps extending Butler's theory far enough. For in concentrating on the political elements, Campbell and Weber fail to translate the theory into the social sphere and therefore do *not* consider the state as an entity constituted not only by institutions but also by the populations inside it.

Part of the reason why the concepts of 'nation' and 'state' are so difficult to isolate with precision rests precisely on the claim that the relation between the identity of the populations and the institutions is interconstitutive. If Foucault and Butler are right in arguing that social, economic and political institutions are structures that all contribute

toward the construction of identity (whether of the state as in Weber and Campbell, or of the nation as in later chapters of this thesis), then it seems that the social sphere is of equal importance as the political one. The lack of concentration on the social sphere in Campbell and Weber may therefore be a plausible criticism of their theories, although I do not pursue this criticism any deeper here. What is more important for this study concerns the implications of such a criticism. For if arguments exist claiming that the political identity of states is performatively constructed, it may well be the case that arguments can be found to show that the identity of nations is, or can be, performatively constructed also.

The initial conclusion that stems from all of this is that the scope of Butler's theory may be wider than she expected, or than Campbell and Weber believe. It seems to me that the theory of performative construction of identity can play a significant role in explaining how in a more integrated manner national identity is formed and re-formed from what I will term a 'social' point of view. In this way, I hope to show that the theory of performative construction of national identity can be even more useful than Campbell or Weber suggest.

#### ***4. Introducing Anderson: imagined communities***

The theory of performative construction of identity was created for a different purpose than application in international relations. Butler talks about subjects, referring to women mainly, and approaches the problems of coercive heterosexuality. However its application in the studies of nations could be invaluable because of the ideas she exposes and the systematic theoretical way in which she analyzes identity construction. However, a conceptual 'bridge' is needed in order to propel her performative theory more fully into the realms of explaining how national identity is constructed. That bridge rests on a deeper exploration of the concept of 'the nation'.

The work of Benedict Anderson provides the key to make Butler's theory fruitful and compelling with regard to national identity formation. For that aim, seeing national identity as any other kind of subject is necessary. This is, of course, what Butler, Weber and Campbell do not do. It is, however, what Anderson does superlatively. Another reason for choosing Anderson involves his concept of 'belonging' which will become crucial for illustrating the arguments later in this thesis. I hope to show that Anderson provides us with a useful vehicle that permits a coherent application of Butler's ideas to a deeper explanation of how national identity is constructed.

Combining Butler's central ideas with an understanding of what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imagined community' is the best way to allow both authors to complement each other (as opposed to them canceling each other out). As we shall see, the conceptualization of the nation and nationalism in Anderson's famous *Imagined Communities*, shares numerous parallels with Butler's performative construction of identity, and therefore provides a basic theoretical compatibility. However, while interesting and highly regarded, Anderson does not systematize his ideas into a theory, as such. What I hope to do is to use Anderson to extend the application and appeal of Butler's theory more into the field of international relations. At the same time, I hope to use her theory to complement Anderson's approach with a more systematic way of explaining the processes in which he bases his studies.

Anderson's book addresses the questions of nations and nationalism by the use of socio-cultural explanations. While Butler did not use Anderson's work, his ideas provided a precedent in his explanation of the phenomenon of the construction of the nation as a subject, first published in 1983. The most interesting element is that, unlike Butler,

Campbell and Weber, Anderson links individuals with the collective. He explains how the behaviors of individuals are determined by and determine the nation.

Anderson's analysis is based on the influence of different processes or events on the formation of nations. This is studied primarily in terms of their impact on the individual and from there on to group psychology. In this way, Anderson explains how nations are subjectively constructed, through the impact of certain issues on its members. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson explains how all nations are *imagined* because they are illusory political communities that are *sovereign* and *limited*. They are *imagined* because their members belong to a "deep, horizontal comradeship",<sup>53</sup> and create the nations by the perception of being part of this commonality in which they are members only if they envisage in their mind the communion.<sup>54</sup> In other words, communities that appear to be natural and 'old' are in fact conventional: constructed much more recently. They get their legitimacy both from the age of the imagined community and the supposedly natural status it is believed to hold. However, for Anderson, these are illusory. The similarities with Butler's point that identity appears to be the result of the repetition of acts when in fact it is not so readily separable from the repetitive performance of acts are clear.

For Anderson, these political communities are *limited* because the boundaries of their membership are essential to demarcate the collectivity that belongs. They are *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which reason destroyed the legitimacy of the divine or dynastic realm.<sup>55</sup> Hence, "the community is imagined, because, regardless

---

<sup>53</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms* (New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>56</sup>

Anderson touches the topics of identity, belief and expectation. All are ideas that were later exposed and emphasized by Butler in her texts of gender studies. Identity is also an artificial element for Anderson, and it is an instrument which has an irrefutable impact upon our understanding of culture, belonging and the political entities we are a part of. One point which will become important later in this thesis concerns Anderson’s understanding of ‘artificial’. We should not understand artificial as the opposite of socially constructed. Anderson mentioned, when criticizing Ernest Gellner on this matter, that the creation or process of shaping identity should not be taken to the extreme understanding identity as something false or completely invented.<sup>57</sup> The idea of artificial refers to the flexibility of identity to be formed or influenced by an institutionally persuaded culture.<sup>58</sup>

The main reason for this artificiality is that the behavior, belonging or even ethnicity of a person is not something naturally determined, but constructed by experiences. The context, with all its elements, has a normative impact on the behavior and beliefs of individuals. Communities receive the influence of a society shaped around certain values, experiences, history and a sense of a common future. These factors are objective to the single individual, who imagines them as ‘the normal’ and also as determining for itself. Usually individuals, especially in the early stages of life, have no opportunity to scrutinize the partiality of these experiences of the context in relation to other communities. With time and repetition they consolidate a perception of them as the ‘normal’. This develops later into a sense of belonging when they see themselves compared with the other groups in the

---

<sup>56</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

world, that have also a common culture, behavior and history that appear to them as ‘foreign’.

My reading of Anderson in this respect is that in our contemporary understanding of the world, even though we might have contact with other cultures in the early stages of life, the notion of nation and nationality as a universal concept is the cause of an expectation of belonging. Again, the similarities between his approach here and Butler’s emphasis on expectation are apparent. Indeed, an understanding of Butler’s point about anticipation constituting identity can permit a deeper understanding of Anderson’s basic point. People are determined in many ways by their relation to, or membership within, a certain nationality, and this belonging is understood as ‘natural’. But nations are not something natural or objective, they are subjective and imagined. They exist only to the extent that they exist in people’s imagination. Nations are “imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>59</sup> Thus the sense of belonging to a nation, and the nation itself, depends on individual perception and the development of a sense of belonging constructed by the conventions of society.

Anderson recalls Seton-Watson’s hypothesis of the creation of a nation in which Watson said “[a]ll that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.”<sup>60</sup> He translates the idea of “consider themselves” into “imagined themselves.”<sup>61</sup> Then he explains using Gellner’s words that “[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to

---

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States* (London: Methuen, 1977), 5, cited by Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6, fn 9.

self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”<sup>62</sup> In the same sense, identity itself, for Butler, is an illusion retroactively created by our performances. “In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*.”<sup>63</sup>

To explain national identity construction by the use of performativity it is very useful to employ the theories of Anderson and Butler combined. First because Anderson talks about the effects of national identity construction and the processes by which it is constructed and considered to be old. While this is undoubtedly interesting and even groundbreaking, his work in the area lacks the very systematic theorization that Butler’s theory can give. What I therefore propose as a theoretical framework for this thesis is to blend ideas from the two thinkers in such a way that a wider scope is provided for Butler’s theory and Anderson’s important, yet rather narrative, perspective is grounded in a more systematic theoretical structure.

Second, the point that national belonging can be artificially (consciously by the state) constructed needs to be emphasized perhaps more than Anderson does, which is what Butler’s theory implies for gendered identity, and what this thesis implies for national identity. In the sphere of gender studies Butler stated that

[t]he act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 169.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 271.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 272.

In the particular case of this thesis, this idea can explain the importance of the role of the state in the definition of performativity. What Butler mentions as the ‘script’, can easily be interpreted as the norms and institutions given by the state. These norms and institutions survive the national subjects, and have been going on before one arrived on the national scene. It, of course, needs the performance of the nationals to be actualized and reproduced as reality. Yet the anticipated existence of state defined norms and institutions is very important and reveals the importance of the state in defining those parts of the script that the actors will later reproduce.

In a certain form, the theory of performative construction of identity and the explanation of imagined communities can direct the understanding of the creation of the performative construction of the nation. Putting both together, we can hypothesize that the institutions of a state can implement policies with norms to be executed in a performative way. This idea brings additional clarity and the required theoretical background for my second sub-hypothesis, which is that identity has, in practice, been used as an artificial instrument significant for the construction of the Japanese nation state. Performativity gives the essence of the nation, when individuals, through the performance of the norms and their repetition, start to recognize the meaning of their existence and start to belong to an illusory entity. This imaginary belonging creates the nation state.

##### ***5. Elements of the theory to be used in this thesis***

Now, with the fundamental grounding of the theoretical framework, we can understand the bases of the performative construction of identity applied to the national sphere. Since the theories of Butler and Anderson are extremely wide and complex, it is important to set the boundaries of this thesis with the most important pieces, combined and developed to best

explore the case of nation state construction in Japan. For this aim in the following chapters, I will focus my study based on a limited version of the theory of performative construction of identity, with broader application to the case of construction of the nation state. This version includes the topics of nationness, representation, repetition/ritual, of normative subjectivity and performativity. These are concepts that should be explained to enhance a concrete understanding of its meaning and function within the theory.

First of all, it is important to make the precise definition of the concept of 'nationness' as I interpret it from now on in this thesis. We usually understand nationness as something determined by a behavior of those who were natural members of a social group called a nation. I discussed in the introduction to this thesis the way in which 'nation' may be initially conceived. It is here that I wish to start building a deeper understanding of that conception and how it is understood as a mode of belonging. Taking into consideration both Butler's and Anderson's work, we can state that 'nationness' is more determined by a behavior dependant on our imagination. Anderson emphasized that we imagine ourselves as part of a group, I would add that we also act and perform in accordance to that imagined community, making possible the existence of that group. Nationness is a construction, a part of the contemporary human identity which is determined by our need to belong to a nation and our belief in it. The social and psychological elements are the ones that produce the conduct, and what was considered before a biological or natural part of our identity becomes clearly something constructed. This idea of humans acting as if they were part of a group, and an identified group coming into existence by the acts surrounding the first idea, can be explained by way of the performative construction of identity theory.

Butler asserts that through the performance of gender, ‘man’ or ‘woman’ appears to be as it is presented or exteriorized.<sup>65</sup> In other words, the repetition of certain acts gives to it a certain image and a sense of existence. A number of taboos and rules shape human behavior, making it seem ‘normal’. This creates the illusion of a stable gender that we perform consistently to what it is. In that sense, the theory of Butler makes clear that an essential part of performativity is its norms, the limits of the performance to fit into what seems to be natural. Performativity is then demarcated by the norms that by repetition make the performance to achieve authority of natural or ideal.<sup>66</sup> Performativity is lived reality, constructed and normalized by the norms and the repetition.

This leads us to an explanation of the performative construction of identity in a similar structure as the hermeneutic circle. This is a circle of perspective, a theory used to explain that one fraction of a thing cannot be analyzed without understanding the whole, but it is impossible also to understand a whole without an understanding of the parts. This is no paradox but refers to the process of understanding as a spiral. The more we understand the parts, the more we understand the whole and vice versa. In the case of Butler’s theory, performativity has the same effect. It understands identity construction not as a definitive process, but as a spiral process of interaction between the performance and the norms. The spiral puts humans in a position in which they put forward a statement of themselves, and the more they perform the more they *become* in an endless process of the creation of identity. It is an interactive *process* which means it is continuous – each part of the circle is impacted upon and changes as a result of its interaction with all the other parts.

---

<sup>65</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Cynthia Weber, “Performative States,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (1998), 77-95.

Its elements are neither first nor last, that is why it can be understood as neither definitive, nor central, nor peripheral

The performative construction of identity goes beyond the single reaction or psychological effects of Pavlovian ‘conditioning’. It is not exactly the conditioning of an individual by means of identity or norms. In a Pavlovian reaction, meaning is *automatically* ascribed to an action whose repetition generates a reflex response – as in the salivation of Pavlov’s dogs (reflex response) on hearing the bell that precedes feeding (action). The meaning here is not integral to the action, but to the results it produces. In conditioning, the nature of the action is not important for this reason. So it is likely that the response would be the same even if the action was different, but applied in a similar way, for example if the bell was replaced by an alternative sensory experience like a mild electric shock or a different sound.

While it is the repetition that remains crucial both in conditioning and in the performative construction of identity, it is not understood in the same way in the latter. Here the repetition of acts has a ritual-like status where meaning is ascribed to the repeated performance of the act itself. That is to say, the meaning is not inherent in the response or result of the action. It is not strictly speaking inherent to the action itself although, as we shall see, there is a relation between the nature of the action and identity. Identity is rather generated by, and located in, the repeated performance of the action. Identity therefore should not be understood as a *consequence* of the repetition of actions, although it might appear to be so. This is because, as it is hermeneutic, it cannot be understood independently from the repetition of those actions along the usual logic of cause and effect. Instead, it is created and allocates meaning only within the repetitive performance of actions. In this way, “[i]dentity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be

its results.”<sup>67</sup> The idea of performative creation of identity refers to the concept as something executed. What is most significant, however is that this “performativity is... not a singular ‘act’, but the reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status... *it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition*”.<sup>68</sup> This is, of course, Butler’s crucial point. She is saying here that it is because identity appears to be the *consequence* of repetitive performance of actions that the importance of the conventions in generating it is hidden. Gendered identity thus appears to be a natural thing, independent from the performance of conventions, where really it is totally dependent on them. The point is that if they changed, unlike in conditioning, Butler’s argument is that identity would change. My argument follows a similar line. Performances, then, become more meaningful and asserting to the extent that they are repeated.<sup>69</sup> These assertions lead to a relation that is important for understanding the creation of a nation state by the same premises, the connection between norms and performativity. Norms can be set by the society, but also by institutions of the state, as I will demonstrate the Japanese state did to create the nation.

In that case, the sphere in which this thesis applies the theory of performative construction of identity can be described as follows. The significance of an individual has a definitive connection with the acts it performs. Those acts, repeated and set by norms give an individual a fictitious meaning that represents itself through the performativity. Hence we can say that one *becomes* by one’s actions, but in reality this performativity only gives us an illusory identity. However, just because it is not ‘real’ in any concrete sense, does not mean that it is not highly meaningful. On the contrary, if Butler and the poststructuralists

---

<sup>67</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12. [my emphasis]

<sup>69</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.

are correct, no identity can be conceived of as ‘real’ in the way that the Enlightenment tradition seemed to think and this realization permits us to understand better how identity might be constructed.

While Anderson does not put it in quite the same way, his argument is consistent with this general approach. Meaning for him lies in our shared ‘perception’ and ‘belief’ that our identity is real. So, for all that it is located in our imagination, the shared identity retains its importance, precisely because it is easier to discover from where it is constructed if it is understood in this way. Whether it is constructed from the rules of the society, or the rules established officially by the institution of a state, individuals and groups can develop an identity and a sense of belonging which will create imaginary subjects or an imaginary community or state. Anderson concentrates on the social origin of national identity construction. I wish to argue in this thesis that the theory of performative construction of identity also shows with some precision where the state can be understood as the conscious originator of certain modes of shared identity.

The five main themes of the theory of performative construction of identity that I will use to apply to national identity are nationness, representation, normative subjectivity, repetition and ritual and, finally, performativity.

**Nationness** is the aspect of identity determined by a behavior dependant on our imagination, in which individuals consider themselves as fellow-members of a nation and construct it by the means of creating by imagination.

**Representation** is the effect of institutions producing subjects that they will represent or govern. It is also a process of inclusion by the means of politics.

**Normative subjectivity** is the process of delimiting the behavior and the further forms of performativity in the subjects.

Normative subjectivity goes then from state norms into social practices and **rituals**; in this case the **repetition** is a part of performativity in which behavior already internalized takes place over and over to assert identity.

Finally **performativity** is the spiral of interaction and permanent construction of the previous mentioned themes, which by re-creation constructs identity. In later chapters I will return to these five themes within the theory of performative identity construction and attempt to develop them further.

## **6. Conclusions**

It is hoped that the application of the performative construction of identity theory in this thesis will affirm that the norms of the performativity can be and are established by the institutions of the state as well as by the institutions of society. If so, then the existence of the nation follows the existence of the state. By the use of state policies, institutions enforce norms that impact upon the acts of the population. This creates a performativity that constructs an identity of meaning of the individuals of the society. Through that, populations start to mean and perform repeatedly as subjects of a nation. The more they engage in performativity, the more they acquire a national sense of belonging and the more they perceive themselves to be nationals. In other words, nationness in its cognitive, emotional and moral spheres is institutionally shaped by means of repetition. And by that sense of belonging the state can artificially create or construct a nation within the existing state.

In the case of representation we should remember that in Butler's studies, those institutions are producing the subjects they will represent, and others which would be excluded from 'the natural' or 'normal'. On those bases, I argue that those institutions

could be productive not only in an unintentional way, but also to intentionally produce the form and type of subjects to represent or govern. Since national unity is an important factor for national power, there exists the possibility of governments that work through the institutions to produce national subjects to give unity and legitimacy to the state. What emerges from this is that by illustrating the artificial, conventional, and historical nature of gender construction, Butler attempts to critique the assumptions of normative heterosexuality. With a similar analysis, we can explain the development of individual's identities with an artificial, conventional and historically created sense of belonging. Nationness then becomes an imaginary part of our identity constructed by performativity, which makes individuals act repeatedly in a way they perceive to be 'natural' and as the determining characteristic of their identified group.

In this chapter I explicated the central ideas of Judith Butler's theory of performative construction of identity. I provided several arguments suggesting that it is valid to use this theory within the realms of national identity even though it was not constructed for that purpose. I also blended it with the point of view and topics which are most interesting in Benedict Anderson's work. The interconnection of their manuscripts suggests further benefits of using Butler to explain the complex process of constructing the national identity. Yet, as I have stressed, since the theory is rather complex, it is difficult to understand it fully in the abstract. In view of this, it seems prudent to explore and highlight the usefulness of various elements of the theory further by applying it to a practical example. For this reason, in the next chapter I take advantage of one of the most successful cases of historical construction of national identity: a case that many scholars use as an example of homogeneity, which is a strong proof of its achievement in asserting national identification and unification of a culturally and ethnically diverse country not only inside

the state, but also to foreign eyes. The next chapter will therefore focus on the Japanese case of national identity construction.