For and Against
PRECARITY

BY Judith Butler

In this time, neo-liberal economics increasingly structures public institutions, including schools and universities, as well as public services, in a time in which people are losing their homes, their pensions, and their prospects for work in increasing numbers, we are faced with the idea that some populations are considered disposable. There is short-term work, or post-Fordist forms of flexible labor that rely on the substitutability and dispensability of working peoples, bolstered by prevailing attitudes toward health insurance and social security that suggest that market rationality should decide whose health and life should be protected, and whose health and life should not. And this was, for some of us, keenly exemplified at that meeting of the Tea Party in which one member suggested that those who have serious illness and cannot pay for health insurance would simply have to die. A shout of joy rippled through the crowd, according to published reports. It was, I conjecture, the kind of joyous shout that usually accompanies going to war or forms of nationalist fervor. But if this was for some a joyous occasion, it must be precisely because of a belief that those who do not make sufficient wages or who are not in secure enough employment do not deserve to be covered by health care, and that none of the rest of us our responsible for those people.

Under what economic and political conditions do such joyous forms of cruelty emerge? The notion of responsibility invoked by that crowd must be contested without, as you will see, giving up on the idea of a political ethics. For if each of us is responsible only for ourselves, and not for others, and if that responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to become economically self-sufficient under conditions when self-sufficiency is structurally undermined, *then we can see that this neo-liberal morality, as it were, demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that it works to destroy that very possibility at an economic level.* Those who cannot afford to pay into health care constitute but one version of population deemed disposable. Those who are conscripted into the army with a promise of skills training and work, sent into zones of conflict where there is no clear mandate and where their lives can be destroyed, and are sometimes destroyed, are also disposable populations. They are lauded as essential to the nation at the same time that their lives are considered dispensable. And all those who see the increasing gap between rich and poor, who understand themselves to have lost several forms of security and promise, they also understand themselves as abandoned by a government and a political economy that clearly augments wealth for the very few at the expense of the general population.

So this leads to the second point. When people amass on the street, one implication seems clear: They are still here and still there; they persist; they assemble, and so manifest the understanding that their situation is shared, and even when they are not speaking or do not present a set of negotiable demands, the call for justice is being enacted. The bodies assembled "say" we are not disposable, whether or not they are using words at the moment. What they say, as it were, is that we are still here, persisting, demanding greater justice, a release from precarity, a possibility of a livable life.

To demand justice is, of course, a strong thing to do. It also involves every activist in a philosophical question: What is justice, and what are the means through which the demand for justice can be made? The reason it is said that sometimes there are "no demands" when bodies assemble under the rubric of "Occupy Wall Street" is that any list of demands would not exhaust the ideal of justice that is being demanded. We can all imagine just solutions to health care, public education, housing, and the distribution and availability of food—in other words, we could itemize the injustices in the plural and present those as a set of specific demands. But perhaps the demand for justice is present in each of those demands, but also necessarily exceeds them. We do not have to subscribe to Platonic theory of Justice to see other ways in which this demand operates. For when bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands. They are demanding to be recognized and to be valued; they are exercising a right to appear and to exercise freedom; they are calling for a livable life. These values are presupposed by particular demands, but they also demand a more fundamental restructuring of our socio-economic and political order.

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ulations that are increasingly subject to what is called "precaritization." This process—usually induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions that acclimatize populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness (see Isabell Lorey)—is built into the institutions of temporary labor, of decimated social services, and of the general attrition of social democracy in favor of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximize one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life. In my view, this important process of precaritization has to be supplemented by an understanding of precarity as a structure of affect, as Lauren Berlant has suggested, and as a heightened sense of expendability or disposability that is differentially distributed throughout society. In addition, I use a third term, precariousness, which characterizes every embodied and finite human being, and non-human beings as well. This is not simply an existential truth—each of us could be subject to deprivation, injury, debilitation or death by virtue of events or processes outside of our control. It is also, importantly, a feature of what we might call the social bond, the various relations that establish our interdependency. In other words, no one person suffers a lack of shelter without a social failure to organize shelter in such a way that it is accessible to each and every person. And no one person suffers unemployment without a system or a political economy that fails to safeguard against that possibility.

This means that in some of our most vulnerable experiences of social and economic deprivation what is revealed is not only our precariousness as individual persons— thought that is surely revealed as well—but also the failures and inequalities of socio-economic and political institutions. In our individual vulnerability to precarity, we find that we are social beings, implicated in a set of networks that either sustain us or fail to do so, or do so only intermittently, producing a constant spectre of despair and destitution. Our individual wellbeing depends on whether the social and economic structures that support our mutual dependency can be put into place. This happens only by breaking with the neo-liberal status quo, enacting the demands of the people through the gathering together of bodies in a relentlessly public, obdurate, persisting, activist struggle that seeks to break and remake our political world. As bodies, we suffer and we resist and together, in various locations, exemplify that form of the sustaining social bond that neo-liberal economics has almost destroyed.