



Resistance in vulnerability with an eye to the vulnerability of power

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review of

Butler J., Z. Gambetti and L. Sabsay (eds.) (2016) *Vulnerability in resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press. (PB, pp x + 336, £21.99, ISBN 978-0-8223-6290-6).

The general aim of this volume is to rethink vulnerability both at the ontological and political level and in its multifaceted relations with resistance. It features a series of essays that engage with the topic from a variety of geopolitical contexts and theoretical perspectives. This variety is also reflected in the different polemical targets that range from the patriarchal coupling of vulnerability and passivity to the neoliberal understanding of resilience and the humanitarian discourse. This is definitely a brilliant experiment that brings together a variety of heterogeneous reflections, 'a polyphonic mode of making sense of the shifting problematic before us' (7). Yet, it is a polyphony of reflections and conceptual explorations, rather than a polyphony of authors. Because among the contributors, Judith Butler is clearly the cornerstone of the volume. In the general polyphony, her voice is absolutely dominant. But, far from being a defect, this constitutes the actual strength of the volume. Butler's thought on vulnerability, gender, public appearance and resistance is deployed, explored and applied from a variety of angles and perspectives. In this book, we see the results of what Butler's concept of vulnerability can do or how it can be used. In this sense, the volume is not only an interesting nomadic exploration of the potentialities of a concept (hence it draws

its philosophical relevance), but it is also an inspirational and thought provoking tool for further explorations.

Butler's concept opposes traditional understandings of vulnerability that link it to passivity, inactivity. Resistance is obviously excluded from this account of vulnerability. In its passivity, the vulnerable is the disposable victim that can only be helped or rescued. By the same token, vulnerability is traditionally gendered resulting from the patriarchal binary code that poses activity as a masculine attribute, while '[v]ulnerability appears as the ultimate truth about women; it almost becomes the general defining character of being a woman' (Ahiska, 221).

The conceptualisation of vulnerability becomes terrain for political contestation. As traditional understandings of vulnerability are produced by and reproduce dominant forms of political subjectivation, the rethinking of vulnerability in relation to agency and, by extension, resistance shows its political urgency and the prefiguration of an alternative politics of solidarity from below: 'Once we understand the way that vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone. I consider the undoing of this binary a feminist task' (Butler, 25).

The starting point for Butler's reconceptualization is the idea of human body as relational and interdependent. The body is exposed to and depends on 'infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance' (*ibid.*, 21). But the idea of interdependence does not imply the lack of acting. This radical interdependency constitutes the ground to affirm vulnerability as ontological and existential condition. Vulnerability affirms both the capacity of the body to act and to be acted upon, to affect and to be affected. However, vulnerability is also a socially induced condition. Vulnerable populations or vulnerable subjects are indeed the result and effect of a history of power relations and systems of domination. There is a differential distribution of vulnerability and this, in turn, can be and is politically mobilised.

The political mobilisation of vulnerability constitutes the focus of Butler's essay. She looks at the politically and socially induced vulnerability that affects those whose infrastructure have been decimated by the neoliberal wave of austerity. On the one hand, the state enforces the destruction of basic material conditions for a livable life. On the other hand, it enacts its paternalistic humanitarian discourse reproducing the coupling of vulnerability and passivity. Yet, resistance emerges nevertheless, not only despite vulnerability, but precisely because of it. When this condition of precarity makes its public appearance through assemblies and demonstrations, vulnerability is not only exposed politically in the sense of Arendt,

but also vulnerability manifests itself in the face of police violence. ‘Vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment’ (*ibid.*, 22).

The other essays in the collection experiment with Butler’s concept through original and often not reciprocally aligned trajectories. It is very refreshing to find attempts to engage with philosophy from unorthodox perspectives that are often disqualified from academic and scientific discourse. Elena Loizidou starts with her grandmother’s dream to fly back to her village in Cyprus in a call for including dreams and their recounting into Arendt’s conception of the political subject. Marianne Hirsch offers her personal recollections as a German Jew girl migrating to US and reflects on postmemorial aesthetic strategies to practice vulnerability as a form of attunement and responsibility. Elsa Dorlin gives a critical reading of masking from the veil wars in France to *Wonder woman* and then discusses ‘Hey Baby!’ a first-person-shooter video game where a woman indefinitely kills her harassers that questions, although problematically, the coupling of vulnerability and passivity. Other authors privilege art and aesthetics as a way of problematising vulnerability. The work of Palestinian artist and activist Mona Hatoum is presented by Elena Tzelepis as a political representation and enactment of vulnerable corporalities at the intersection of struggles over citizenship and gender. Başak Ertür proposes a brilliant analysis of barricades at Gezi Park, which he frames through Lefebvre as artefacts of counter-monumentalisation of resistance.

Another important contribution of the volume is the creation of a geopolitically diverse, although obviously not exhaustive, archive of vulnerability at stake in recent examples of resistance. Athena Athanasiou presents the idea of nonsovereign agonism through the experience of Women in Black, a group of women standing in the public streets of Belgrade in 1991 mourning the victims of their alleged enemies. Palestine features not only in Tzelepis’s essay on Hatoum’s art, but also in the interesting contribution by Rema Hammami that reports on the activism of Western volunteers from the perspective of the community of Masafer Yatta, in the South Hebron Hills. Kurdish feminism is the focus of the essay by Nükhet Sirman, where transgression becomes an existential and political condition, but also prefiguration of an alternative politics. Meltem Ahiska looks at the representation of violence on women in Turkey with a critical reading of those campaigns that depict the victimisation of women as complicit in reinforcing the coupling of women and passivity. Two essays engage with protests at Gezi Park in 2013. The volume largely depends on the discussions at the workshop ‘Rethinking vulnerability and resistance: Feminism and social change’ that took place at Columbia’s University Global Center in Istanbul only one month after the Gezi Park protests. It is particularly interesting to see how the two essays converge to

provide a vivid account of the social and material fabric of the practices of resistance that took place during those weeks. On the one hand, the materiality of the barricades in the continuous process of dismantling and rebuilding recounted by Ertür. On the other hand, the internal agonism and transformations among the protesters representing the transversal composition of resistance, as described by the essay by Zeynep Gambetti.

Yet, despite this polyphonic way of thinking of vulnerability, there is an inevitable tendency for/towards repetition that transforms Butler's concept into a refrain or, at times, into a sterile litany. But this repetition does not solve some of the issues that necessarily emerge when a new concept is created. Beyond the richness of the operation of introducing a new concept accompanied by a series of critical reflections that put that concept at work following its potential lines of experimentation, there is still room from an ultimate question: why vulnerability? There is a persistent feeling that we could have thought along the same conceptual trajectories without ever mentioning vulnerability: relationality, interdependence, permeability (as Leticia Sabsay proposes in her essay), even Butler's own couple precarity-precariousness. These notions appear almost interchangeably in the volume, while little or no effort is made to provide a solid way of distinguishing vulnerability from them. The reason for this is possibly that such a conceptual distinction cannot be operated. Once vulnerability is presented both as existential and socially induced condition it depicts an ontology and a social dynamic that do not add much, for instance, to a Foucauldian conception of the body and of the social as traversed and constituted by power relations. It is absolutely relevant and urgent from a politico-philosophical perspective to affirm this radical relationality of being against liberal and neoliberal attempts to efface interdependence through the ideology of the self-mastery sovereign individual. But, this does not answer our initial interrogative: why vulnerability? Perhaps the only way to answer this question is by pointing at the current and traditional uses of the notion of vulnerability, those which foster a paternalistic attitude towards those victimised and defenceless bodies. In this sense, Butler's operation would consist of reclaiming the term by queering its meaning against these dominant views and the politics they reproduce and strengthen. It is through this genealogical function that we can fully appreciate the necessity of conceptualising vulnerability in this way. We are already beyond the question of 'why vulnerability?'. The volume engages directly with the question of how to think vulnerability differently.

Differently from what? There is very little attention to those mainstream understandings of vulnerability that this volume opposes. No author or theory is explicitly mentioned as a polemical target. If the reader is not familiar (as I am not) with contemporary debates on vulnerability it is quite hard to assess the scope and the success of this polemical attack. Most of the contributors to the volume tend to

refer more to a general patriarchal binary code and to a generic humanitarian discourse largely relying upon the liberal and neoliberal discourse of human rights. Sarah Bracke's essay is the only one that tries to decipher the material coordinates of this hegemonic understanding. She traces a brilliant genealogy of the concept of resilience showing the neoliberal framework that supports the contemporary popularity of this idea. She surveys popular self-help books as a way of portraying resilience as a positive asset to enhance one's human capital; also, she looks at policies on resilience developed by IMF and World Bank to normalise and regulate the capacity of vulnerable population to respond to austerity measures and processes of material exploitation. For Bracke, thinking vulnerability against resilience helps to trace the lines of resistance 'for a world beyond neoliberalism' (Bracke, 70).

Nevertheless, this relation with resistance, not only in Bracke's essay but throughout the volume, remains quite problematic. Whereas vulnerability is treated through a thorough conceptual analysis, resistance is discussed through its manifestations: public squares, barricades, demonstrations, but also resistant existences as in the example of Palestinians [Hammani] and Kurdish [Sirman]. The lack of a conceptual understanding of resistance leave several potential avenues implicit and unexplored. Howard Caygill's *On resistance*, Costas Douzinas' *Philosophy and resistance in the crisis* or Foucault's first volume of the *History of sexuality* might have been valuable theoretical frameworks to problematise resistance also from a theoretical perspective. This absence determines the emergence of a series of interrogatives that remain unfortunately unanswered. For instance, while several contributions depict resistance as the sudden outburst of the event, others rightly sustain an idea of resistance as continuous and uninterrupted process. Hammani eloquently summarises this perspective in reference to Palestinian resistance in the community of Masafer Yatta: 'to exist is to resist. [...] The everyday constant work of just "being" is made up of the multitude of acts of making life possible in and through the everyday' (Hammani, 172). This implicit tension in the understanding of the concept of resistance certainly reflects the polyphony, but in a sense the volume somehow misses the opportunity to offer a more radical intervention in the debate on the concept of resistance.

In fact, we might dare to ask what eventually this conception of vulnerability adds either to our understanding of resistance or to contemporary struggles in general. There are definitely some successful operations in this sense. For instance, it unmasks top-down hegemonic political mobilisation of vulnerability as in the case of those discourses that use the threat of terrorism or of an invasion of migrants to assert the right of the 'vulnerable' white man of the global North to fight back (or, indeed, to strike first). The volume also helps to oppose a certain masculine

ideal of heroism in resistance, in which vulnerability is effaced through the ideal of a self-sufficient and sovereign individual subject that mirrors and mobilises the same very discourse resistance is against to. This definitely constitutes an interesting and urgent task. Yet, I would like to use Hammani's essay to reflect on the efficacy of this attempt of locating vulnerability (or interdependency?) in resistance: 'For situated communities of hyperprecarity, this awareness that one's survival depends on so many others is an everyday doxa' (172). If hyperprecarious communities have always already known this radical dependency and vulnerability, whom is this volume for? Probably, it is for those populations who have been nourished by the liberal and neoliberal mantra of the sovereign masculine individual. But, this, in a way, is another 'everyday doxa' as academic books are generally meant for this kind of audience only. Is the volume then arguing for a romanticised celebration of dispossessed populations from which we should learn? That would definitely be an exaggeration, but this still remains as a potential line of enquiry to continue with the rethinking of the concepts at stake.

Perhaps the idea of rethinking vulnerability in power, rather than in resistance, might have been the key to really liberate an affirmative conception of resistance that remains somehow implicit throughout the volume. That resistance occurs both despite and for the sake of vulnerability is somehow an everyday doxa as well. Traditional understandings of resistance have often remarked the vulnerability, the impotency or even the futility of resistance. In resistance, we have always known that we might not be defenceless, but we are most probably bound to defeat. And from this everyday doxa, we conclude that power, on the other hand, is monolithic and eternal. Our imagination is thwarted to the extent that, as Bracke puts it following Jameson, it is easier to imagine the end of the world (from an environmentalist perspective) than the end of capitalism. But if vulnerability is an ontological and existential condition from which power cannot escape either, we could have definitely redefined the potential of resistance. This could promote an affirmative conception of resistance. In no way vulnerability needs to be excluded from resistance, but perhaps it would have been interesting to explore this other trajectory that is still present in the volume: power is vulnerable too. We still do not know what we can do (against a vulnerable power – despite our vulnerability).

references

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