
Review

Vulnerability in resistance

Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (eds.)
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Vulnerability in Resistance comprises thirteen essays focusing on vulnerability's manifestations, mobilizations, and deployments in recent feminist and queer struggles in Turkey, Bosnia, and the Middle East. It challenges the idea that vulnerability precludes political agency and resistance to oppressive regimes and analyzes the complex and manifold ways in which vulnerability and action are entwined. More broadly, by joining the concepts of vulnerability and resistance, the editors state, 'we hope to develop a different conception of embodiment and sociality within fields of contemporary power, one that engages object worlds, including both built and destroyed environments, as well as social forms of interdependency and individual or collective agency' (p. 6). The volume's reach and variety are impressive.

The editors emphasize that their efforts are non-totalizing (pp. 7–8). Every essay discusses some particular movement or set of events (or, in the case of Elena Tzelepis' essay on Mona Hatoum, a particular artist's works), drawing general conclusions only very cautiously. This specificity is one of the volume's many strengths. Several authors describe the 2013 occupation of Istanbul's Gezi Park, which started as a protest against the government's violation of construction permits (p. 98). Police brutality, censorship, and state repression exacerbated tensions and ignited a built-up store of antipathy toward Tayyip Erdoğan's governing party. Anti-government protests quickly spread across Turkey. Gezi Park itself, as well as nearby Taksim Square, became a 'state-free zone' for ten days after protesters erected barricades and expelled police (p. 98). Basak Ertür's essay examines the practice of building barricades – structures ineffective against tanks and machine guns but carrying great symbolic weight – as a kind of counter-monumental undertaking in relation to the state monuments that mark Taksim Square. Barricades make palpable the contingency of the protests and the vulnerability of the protesters. Zeynep Gambetti's essay uses Gezi as a ground for interpreting Hannah Arendt's assertion that human greatness is not just of doer and deed but also of endurer and sufferer (p. 28). Gambetti offers agonism as a concept for bringing action and openness-to-undergoing together. In acting, one also undergoes and may be



transformed; in undergoing, acting may be imperative. Following Bonnie Honig, she highlights ways in which, for Arendt, subjectivity and identity are performative and maintains that action is more event-like than the result of conscious choice by a masterful subject. Therefore, she argues vulnerability and agency are inseparable. Gambetti's piece is one of the most intriguing in the volume.

Athena Athanasiou (familiar to English-speaking feminist theorists as Judith Butler's co-author in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*) argues that the Women in Black stage mourning as a site of agonistic resignification (p. 266). Appearing in mourning clothes in Belgrade's Republic Square in 1991, the Women in Black defied traditions dictating that women's work of mourning occur in private and in service of family and country. They held signs proclaiming themselves 'disloyal' and declaring that they 'mourn all victims,' including those deemed enemies by the state (p. 257). These acts constitute catachrestic mourning, Athanasiou maintains, placing in question both gender and sovereignty and performing a kind of non-sovereign political subjectivity (p. 267). This mourning is a commemoration of those obliterated in public memory. Unlike the process of mourning as described by psychoanalysis, it is not a means for achieving closure, but an affirmation of the 'im/possibility' of mourning and a means of interrogating the normative frames that regulate which losses are permitted to be named and witnessed (p. 273). Athanasiou presents a powerful analysis of vulnerability inextricable from agency, and of agency as a mode of open becoming (p. 275).

Rema Hammami's essay 'Precarious Politics' describes the political activity, which is also a means for survival, of farmers and shepherds in Masafer Yatta. About 230 communities, many of them Bedouin, live under Israeli military rule in a permanent state of emergency (p. 170). Colonized and unable to maintain any infrastructure, the groups eke out a living on the land, which they are constantly in danger of losing to their occupiers. The Israeli government considers them dispensable, and most of the rest of the world cares little about their existence. With no right to protest and confronted with the fact that violence would only give the occupiers a pretext for killing them, they seek ways to make themselves visible to and connect with people the rest of the world considers grievable. They have 'internationalized' their space by inviting international activists – mostly young people, many of them female – to live with them and accompany them to their fields and pastures each day so that the army dares not kill them. They become visible to the world alongside the bodies of those the world recognizes as rights bearers, as valuable, as grievable. In this process, transgression of heteronormativity is both necessary and carefully attended (p. 184). Because men are the likely targets of state violence, women accompany them as protection, and when men are taken it is often women – community members and international activists – who rescue them. Traditional feminine roles are thus both deployed and subverted.

The essays' discussions of concrete events are fascinating in themselves, but their main purpose is to ground developing theory. Sarah Bracke's analysis of



discourses of resilience as a neoliberal technology of the self is a very smart piece of theoretical work. In ‘Bouncing Back’, Bracke carefully exposes how practices of resilience derail resistance by foreclosing any possibility of transformation. And, while there is little engagement with pre-twentieth-century political theory, Arendt’s writings figure significantly in several essays. The two contributors most engaged with Arendt are Gambetti (discussed above) and Elena Loizidou, who examines the place of dreaming in political subjectivity. Both these essays challenge and stretch Arendt in interesting ways. Meltem Ahiska draws on Marcuse in her analysis of escalating violence against women in Turkey. Elsa Dorlin makes interesting use of Agamben’s work in ‘Bare Subjectivity: Faces, Veils, and Masks in the Contemporary Allegories of Western Citizenship’.

The main theorist engaged here, however, is Judith Butler, whose paper ‘Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance’ heads the volume. The other essays are in constant dialogue with Butler, using her concepts of precariousness and precarity, grievability and performativity extensively in their analyses in intriguing, and occasionally critical, ways. This dialogue both illuminates Butler’s ideas and demonstrates how they can be applied to issues quite different from the ones Butler herself has written about. For anyone interested in Butler’s work, this volume will be very valuable. Indeed, as a whole, *Vulnerability in Resistance* is an extremely provocative and valuable contribution to global feminist studies.

Before concluding, I turn to more general observations. All scholarly conversations occur within political and intellectual contexts. Readers unfamiliar with the context in which this book was conceived may be puzzled by its premise, namely, that vulnerability and active resistance have been taken to be incompatible, that vulnerability means passivity (which calls for and justifies paternalism), and that active resistance assumes self-possession or self-mastery. Western political theory typically has not divided humanity into active and passive, masterful and vulnerable. For Hobbes and Locke, vulnerability is the motivation for all political engagement. Similarly, no Marxist imagines that the poor, the uneducated, and the miserable are incapable of political action of the most significant sort. Classic theories cannot be the target of these analyses.

Nor are these essays critiques of activist practice. Grassroots organizing is all about mobilizing people in their vulnerability, to disclose their oppression, confronting those who are responsible for exacerbating their suffering and in a position to redress or reduce it. When legislators hold hearings on predatory lending, for example, community organizers in my part of the world pack the room with people victimized by these lenders to tell their stories to lawmakers. When queer and African American children are handed over to police for alleged misbehavior in school, feeding the ‘school-to-prison pipeline,’ parents and children go before school boards to describe how such policies affect their families and futures. Grassroots movements draw attention to the lives that policies affect, because focusing attention on those lives’ concrete reality – on the injuries done



and the deliberate struggles injured people wage to survive despite those setbacks – is powerful in and of itself.

If neither grassroots activists nor political theorists, who are this book's opponents? They are the people in between, so to speak, activists who work at levels above the grassroots, within international institutions – the UN and NGOs. It is in their discourses that these ideas emerge, in discussions of policies and populations. It is as populations that people are vulnerable to climate change or pandemics or genocide. Only at the level of population could one speak as if vulnerable people are passive. As individuals, families, and communities, vulnerable people are always actively shaping their own lives. Explicitly naming this discursive target – the human rights discourses of international policy and response organizations – and distinguishing it from traditional theoretical and grassroots discourses would have helped make the central issues of the volume clearer for many readers.

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