

VULNERABILITY

IN RESISTANCE



**JUDITH BUTLER, ZEYNEP GAMBETTI,
AND LETICIA SABSAY, EDITORS**

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*Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti,
and Leticia Sabsay, editors*

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The workshop took place a few months after the Occupy Gezi movement in Turkey, when the spirit of the uprising was still alive. We were trying to make sense of those events, registering both the exhilaration and the sorrow. So we would like to conclude by extending our gratitude to those bodies on the streets who embodied the promise of an alternative society where vulnerability would cease to be a curse and would instead constitute the very ground for modes of solidarity from below.

Introduction

JUDITH BUTLER, ZEYNEP GAMBETTI,
AND LETICIA SABSAY

This volume takes up the challenge to reformulate two fundamental concepts—vulnerability and resistance—beyond two assumptions pervasive in several popular and theoretical discourses. The first holds that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance and cannot be conceived as part of that practice; the second supposes that vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation.

Our point of departure is to call into question through the analysis of concrete contexts the basic assumption that vulnerability and resistance are mutually oppositional, even as the opposition is found throughout in mainstream politics as well as prominent strands of feminist theory. Dominant conceptions of vulnerability and of action presuppose (and support) the idea that paternalism is the site of agency, and vulnerability, understood only as victimization and passivity, invariably the site of inaction. In order to provide an alternative to such frameworks, we ask what in our analytic and political frameworks would change if vulnerability were imagined as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance. What follows when we conceive of resistance as drawing from vulnerability as a resource of vulnerability, or as part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself? What implications does this perspective have for thinking about the subject of political agency? What ideas of the political subject, and political subjectivity, emerge outside, or against, this binary? These preliminary questions lead us to others, where our initial conceptions must be rethought: How are vulnerability and bodily exposure related, especially when we think about the exposure of the body to power? Is that exposure both perilous and enabling? What is the relation

between resistance and agency? In what ways is vulnerability bound up with the problem of precarity?

As we know, there is always something both risky and true in claiming that women or other socially disadvantaged groups are especially vulnerable. On the one hand, we very much want to point it out where it exists. Yet one might conclude that women are in a powerless position and, by implication, that men are always in a powerful one. As a result, feminist activism may turn to paternalistic political and social institutions, investing them with the power to realize feminist goals.¹ In other instances, women struggle to establish practices and institutions that seek to provide protection, or to rescue (always already othered) women, which, albeit not necessarily linked to paternalistic powers, do still enforce paternalistic logics, or rely on figures of victimhood that assume that those who are vulnerable are therefore without agency, or can be summarized by categories that figure them as essentially without agency.² Yet there are other initiatives that, while refusing these forms of politics that amount to the stigmatization and the further disempowerment of the women they are said to protect or save, do not dismiss the induced vulnerability to which many women are exposed and try to offer alternative resources for self-empowerment, collective agency, and protection. These can include feminist forms of self-defense, networks and shelters for battered women, and grass-roots modes of organizing within civil society or outside its established terms.

By itself, the discourse on vulnerability can support any version of politics and has no special claim to supporting a politics on the Left, or a politics for feminism. It can describe the vulnerability of those in power against the forces of resistance by those who are seeking a new political order. Moreover, the discourse on vulnerability can lead to objectionable ontological claims about the constitutive vulnerability of women's bodies, claims we would doubtless want to reject in favor of a social and political account about how vulnerability is produced and distributed. That latter view would be compelled to point out that women—and here we seek to rely on a gender category at once inclusive and open-ended—are the ones who suffer most from poverty and illiteracy, two defining global features of the oppression of women. So the question that emerged for this group, and formed one of our areas of contention, has been this: How do we think about feminist modes of agency, and how can we re-think them in light of global conditions and emerging possibilities of global alliance? And though we concur on this as a task that feminism must take up, we are in different ways engaged in queer, trans, antiracist, anti-authoritarian, and anti-austerity struggles. The terms we examine take on very specific mean-

ings under neoliberal and austerity conditions when the state structures of social democracy and institutions of social welfare are losing their own resources and standing, thus exposing more populations to homelessness, unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate health care. How, then, is the political demand to address these issues to be directed toward those institutions that should be responding to these conditions, at the same time that we seek to resist the models of power represented by those institutions? Are we stuck in the situation in which there are two opposing alternatives, paternalism and victimization? And in accepting those alternatives, do we not reinstate a gendered opposition?

In some forms of feminism, vulnerability has been regarded as a value in feminist theory and politics. Feminists of different strands have long argued for a relational subject as a way to contest liberal forms of individualism primarily, implicated as they are in capitalist concepts of self-interest and masculinist fantasies of sovereign mastery. Whereas some feminists have sought to establish vulnerability and care as values which are specific to women and to which women have special access, we are making no claims about the capacities or dispositions of women as a group. Indeed, what follows is a wide-ranging feminist approach to questions of power and agency that prove to be quite central to some forms of resistance today.

Our common point of departure is derived from critical feminist social theory that seeks to overcome uncritically accepted versions of the mind/body distinction and its reliance on associations of activity with masculinity and passivity with femininity, in order to show that the received definitions of vulnerability as passive (in need of active protection) and agency as active (based on a disavowal of the human creature as “affected”) requires a thorough going critique. In our view, the focus on vulnerability is not intended to validate conventional ways of distinguishing between men and women (or even to validate that binary as a mode of framing an analysis), so the conclusion is, once again, not to make ontological claims about women, nor to underscore their singular ethical dispositions. Those modes of stabilizing gender division through generalized forms of differentiation do not further the task of rethinking modes of resistance. Whatever differential distribution of attributes we may find in some locations depends in part on the lens through which we see, the epistemic grid laid into that lens, and the operative norms of gender operating in the description.

As much as we can, and do, track the way that power operates to establish the disenfranchised as “vulnerable populations,” it remains imperative to

critically examine the logic of disavowal by which vulnerability becomes projected and distanced from prevailing ideas of agency and mastery. Psychoanalytic feminists have remarked that the masculine positions are effectively built through a denial of their own vulnerability. This denial or disavowal requires one to forget one's own vulnerability and project, displace, and localize it elsewhere. Such a mechanism of disavowal operates within the scene of power. In fact, it can work to exacerbate vulnerability (as a way of achieving power) or to disavow it (also as a way of achieving power). For instance, when nations advertise their hypervulnerability to new immigrants, or men openly fear that they are now the victims of feminism, the recourse to "vulnerability" in such instances can become the basis for a policy that seeks to exclude or contain women and minorities, as when the vulnerability of "white people" constructs black people as a threat to their existence.

The argument about disavowal has to be attended to carefully. On the one hand, if we are interested in how vulnerability is socially produced and managed, then we may seem to be saying that vulnerability is the effect of social power. On the other hand, if we claim that vulnerability has a purely ontological status, it seems that we accept a presocial account of vulnerability, and that opens up a new set of theoretical and political problems. So if we argue instead that vulnerability emerges as part of social relations, even as a feature of social relations, then we make (a) a general claim according to which vulnerability ought to be understood as relational and social, and (b) a very specific claim according to which it always appears in the context of specific social and historical relations that call to be analyzed concretely.

The language that we use to describe vulnerability and its disavowal presumes that there is "an already there-ness" to the vulnerability, or that denial is secondary, a cover-up, and so always somewhat false and frail. We can speak of individuals who deny their own vulnerability, or whole nations. Though individuals and groups are different, the logics that condition and reproduce disavowal cut across that difference. When vulnerability is projected onto another, it seems as if the first subject is fully divested of vulnerability, having expelled it externally onto the other. When vulnerability is owned as an exclusive predicate of one subject and invulnerability attributed to another, a different kind of disavowal takes place. Indeed, asymmetry and disavowal work together. Such strategies can work either way: "others" may be exposed to vulnerability as a way of shoring up power, but vulnerability can also be claimed by those who seek to rationalize the subjugation of minorities. Such strategies of claiming vulnerability on the part of the powerful become all

the more complicated, and paradoxical, when norms of white heterosexuality are considered “under attack” by LGBTQ communities, or when feminism is figured as a castrating “threat” to ostensibly vulnerable men. If the concept of vulnerability always operates within a tactical field, how do theoretical affirmations of vulnerability enter into that field? Can such affirmations ever avert the risk of being appropriated by paternalism? At stake is whether this dialectical inversion—which can, at one time, assert the hypervulnerability of those in dominant positions of power and, at another, rely on the presumptive invulnerability of those with power—can be refuted. Further, can that refutation give way to a notion of bodily vulnerability linked with practices of resistance in the service of social and political justice?

In Marxist analysis, the politics of redistribution pertains to goods, and we see water and land rights activism asking for equal distribution of such resources. It may sound odd to refer to an unequal distribution of vulnerability, but perhaps there is no other way to understand the condition of contemporary precarity. That unequal distribution often works in tandem with the management of “vulnerable populations” within discourse and policy. Often social movements, human rights advocates, and institutions refer to precarious or vulnerable populations, for whom political strategies are accordingly devised to ameliorate conditions of exposure and precarity. Does that way of naming a population extend or ameliorate conditions of precarity? Do we lose the sense of those operations of power that differentially assign vulnerability when we take such assignments for granted in launching the analyses that we do? Do we need to understand through what mode of power vulnerable populations are formed as such? While we could think of those forms of institutionalized violence that render certain populations disposable as a form of necropolitics,³ those humanitarian governmental practices that designate them “in need of protection” not only negate the capacity of those declared vulnerable to act politically, but also expand biopolitical forms of regulation and control.⁴

When such redistributive strategies abound, then other populations, usually the ones helping to orchestrate or effect the processes of redistribution, posit themselves as invulnerable, if not impermeable, and without any such needs of protection. In order to counter this untenable framework, vulnerability and invulnerability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power. In following this path, our discussion moves beyond the human rights framework in which the positing of “vulnerable populations” can become a way of foreclosing or

devaluing modes of collective resistance among those designated as vulnerable.⁵ The significance of human rights would not be negated within such a framework, but human rights would not operate as the presumptive framework for such discussions.

We would like to recontextualize the discussion of vulnerability in such a way that its links with paternalism or even with discourses of victimization are critically ameliorated, precisely to make room for an analysis of the role of vulnerability in strategies of resistance. In thinking vulnerability and resistance together, 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. The strategies of resistance on which we propose to focus involve a rethinking of human acts and infrastructural mobilizations, including barricades, hunger strikes, the improvised character of informal groups at the checkpoint, modes of deliberate exposure, and forms of art and artistic intervention in public space that involve “laying bare” and opposing forms of power. The wager of this volume is that one of the main reasons why there is opposition to (if not an outright denial of) vulnerability is that vulnerability has not been adequately related to the existing practices of resistance. Such a formulation involves thinking as well the psychoanalytic and political dimensions of resistance, taking into account its different registers, from the practices of the self, to collective, individual, subjective, or social practices.

Further, we propose to consider resistance in a new light in order to differentiate its strategies from notions of neoliberal resilience that cover over the structural conditions of accelerated precarity, inequality, statelessness, and occupation. Our task is to resist the neutralization of practices of social transformation that follows when the discourse of protection becomes hegemonic, undermining and effacing varied forms of popular resistance or political agency. Our aim is to expand our political vocabulary to meet the challenge to think about modes of vulnerability that inform modes of resistance, and to “resist” those frameworks that seek to underplay or refuse forms of political agency developed under conditions of duress, without presuming, as some accounts of resilience tend to do, that they always prove effective.

Drawing from recent demonstrations that mobilize important forms of embodied resistance as ways of calling attention to the unjust effects of austerity, precarity, neoliberalism, authoritarian control, and securitarian politics, we track the emergence of a vocabulary that breaks with masculinist models of

autonomy without essentializing the feminine or idealizing vulnerability as an ultimate value. The point is to show that vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action. These hold the promise of developing new modes of collective agency that do not deny vulnerability as a resource and that aspire to equality, freedom, and justice as their political aims.

Although dedicated to thinking about these common problems, each of the authors represented in this volume undertook different tasks of cultural translation—we came at the issue from very different geopolitical locations and through different modes of theoretical reflection.⁶ Whereas each contributor has a distinct view, each of us also made an effort to participate in what Zeynep Gambetti called “plural and collective thinking.” Our collaborative work on this topic required a practice of translation that sought to traverse, without denying, the distances among languages, disciplines, theoretical and political genealogies, and areas of research, among academic work, the arts and art criticism, and activism. Not least of our tasks was to mediate among different political and academic tonalities, logics, and lexicons, striving to find a polyphonic mode of making sense of the shifting problematic before us. If we were able finally to move beyond the conventional binary that governs the relationship between vulnerability and resistance, that effort was made possible by our commitment to attend to these different modalities of thought, the different political space-times with which they engage, and the formulations of the political field within which they operate and intervene. Although in some ways the contributors to this volume take these precepts as a common point of departure, their chapters resonate with one another not because they came to adhere to any one language or theory. On the contrary: questions of self-determination, hegemony, mourning, violence, memory, occupation, public demonstrations, representation, the visual field and the visual arts, or freedom pose different challenges to the task of political thinking within a framework that does not oppose vulnerability to resistance. The exchanges among the authors here are reflected in their finished essays, showing how these concepts work or vary when reflected in different registers, moving from the individual scholarship to collaborative forms of making knowledge, all refracted by varying geopolitical conditions and concerns.

The essays in this volume draw from recent events in Turkey and Greece, but also focus on ongoing political struggles of women and minorities in the face of state violence, antiwar and antioccupation activists, struggles at

the level of cultural representation and aesthetic practice, and oppositional dilemmas emerging within anti-austerity politics. They do not claim to represent a full global field; rather, they represent the partial and perspectival offerings of politically engaged scholars working in various regions. Judith Butler's contribution seeks to establish the important ways that vulnerability, reconceived as bodily exposure, is part of the very meaning and practice of resistance. Construing bodily vulnerability as induced by social and material relations of dependency, she shows how popular gatherings in public spaces enact the demand to end precarity by exposing these bodies' vulnerability to failing infrastructural conditions. Zeynep Gambetti revisits the notions of exposure and popular protest, but this time through an Arendtian theory of agonistic individuation. She evokes the Occupy Gezi protests of 2013 to illustrate the intricate connection between acting and suffering, as a result of which social identities and political alignments are destabilized through pluralistic encounters with others. In her critical consideration of a different set of concepts and practices, Sarah Bracke foregrounds how the neoliberal category of "resilience" functions as a governmental tactic aimed at managing resistance and concealing destitution. She argues that "resilience" constitutes a new moral code that works through gendered notions of subjectivity and agency to produce the idea of a subject willing to cope with conditions of increasing precarization. One other major theoretical dilemma is addressed by Marianne Hirsch's chapter. Hirsch brings notions of vulnerability and resistance to bear on theories of trauma and memory that often falter on the question of how it is possible to identify with the pain of others without appropriating that pain. She focuses on the work of several artists and writers who mobilize vulnerability as a way to respond to and take responsibility for traumatic and violent histories. The Occupy Gezi protests and the theme of memory reappear in Başak Ertür's contribution on barricades as a resource of resistance. Ertür understands forms of barricading with human and nonhuman resources as forms of countermonumentalization and bricolage whose strength might be found precisely in their transient and vulnerable structure. She argues that the barricades simultaneously operate as repertoires of collective action and as forms of reattunement to vulnerability.

Elena Loizidou's chapter on dreams and the political subject offers an alternative consideration of involuntary forms of longing as crucial to the understanding of political action, and thus revises our understanding of the political actor as one who exercises wakeful mastery in the course of acting. Can we understand resistance without the sensual domain in which

mastery no longer controls love, dreams, and the arts so essential to civil disobedience or other forms of resistance? Considering the artwork of Mona Hatoum, Elena Tzelepis in turn asks what grammar of vulnerable belonging is produced in the wake of forcible expulsion and diasporic existence for Palestinians. Is there a potential for resistance opened up by art that focuses on questions of loss and finitude? Provoked by such questions, Tzelepis reflects on how Hatoum's feminist aesthetics bring forth a bodily representation of vulnerability. Turning to the occupied West Bank, Rema Hammami's chapter focuses on the struggle and strategy of Palestinian activism that happens within the daily labor of sustaining existence. In contrast to the concept of "protective accompaniment" popularized by human rights discourse, it underscores those forms of connection and alliance that are based less on the need for protection or, indeed, philanthropy than on informal networks of solidarity. The question of the differential visibility of violence in occupied zones foregrounds Hammami's exploration of forms of resistance under conditions of hyperprecarity. In her contribution, Nükhet Sirman focuses on another precaritized population, the Kurds in Turkey. By engaging with the Kurdish struggle for political freedom, she considers the salience of the figure of Antigone for thinking about Kurdish women's vulnerability to Turkish state violence. She highlights the dissimilarities between Turkish and Kurdish feminist discourses and shows how the latter produce a new form of knowledge that accounts simultaneously for the victimization of Kurdish women and their achievements as guerrilla fighters. Meltem Ahıska's critical consideration of the "Violence against Women" campaign in Turkey also questions the language of victimization. Ahıska argues that the efforts to "humanize" battered women establish their substitutability and anonymity, such that "women" come to represent death and victimhood anonymously. She argues for a mode of resistance against this form of "humanization" that would counter the conflation of women's sexuality with injurability and death. In a quite different geographical context, Elsa Dorlin visits a similar yet different problem. Dorlin's essay offers a critical analysis of how the "face" as an ethical category undergoes a political transvaluation in France. Situating "unveiling" as a requirement of French civility, Dorlin shows how mandatory hypervisibility informs the debates on the *niqab* and contemporary surveillance. She explores how the figure of the "mask" connects with forms of resistance that are prefigured in vigilante feminist writings. The double valence of vulnerability is also examined in Athena Athanasiou's considering of agonism as a nonsovereign form of power. The Serbian Women in Black movement is the focus of her analysis of a form of resistance that relies

on what she calls agonistic mourning. She shows how the not-being-at-home-with-itself of mourning poses a challenge to the ordinances of the “affirmation versus mourning” structural opposition. Finally, using a different conception of agonism and antagonism, Leticia Sabsay’s contribution poses a set of critical questions to theories of vulnerability and the contemporary discourse on affect to see how far they are compatible with the theory of hegemony and a broader concept of the political. She suggests permeability as the marker of subjectivity as a transindividual way of being in the world and, drawing on Bakhtin, offers a way to think about the relational subject in conjunction with hegemonic articulation.

As these chapter descriptions suggest, we differ on issues such as agonism and antagonism, how best to think about vulnerability, and which versions of resistance ought to be foregrounded. What strikes us as most important, however, is that vulnerability and resistance enter the picture differently depending on the context and the political question we pose. Our regions vary (Greece, Turkey, Palestine, France, Europe, the United States) and so, too, do our theories (hegemony, agonism, performativity, Marxism, feminism). The terms, vulnerability and resistance, are implicated not only in one another, but also in the settings that activate their relations. This multiplicity does not undo our common aim; rather, it facilitates and furthers the aliveness of this exchange. We are aware of the many sites we could not touch on within the framework of this volume, including the prison industry, refugees, epidemics, and various forms of violence, including state-sponsored racism. We trust that this volume will continue in a perpetual state of becoming, so that what we offer here is not a “result” of our collaboration, but a series of provocations for further thought. We were ourselves provoked by the events in Turkey in 2013, but our questions changed in the course of the journey. One of the principles of collaboration is that each member is affected by the other, becoming transformed in the process, and constituting now a provisional yet promising form of textual belonging in which all the rough edges matter.

Notes

- 1 Nancy Fraser’s “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History” makes an appeal to women’s movements to reconsider calling the state back in. But many feminists are highly critical of state institutions that perpetrate white heterosexual middle-class supremacy in dealing with domestic violence, gender inequality, or

legal justice. Among the most powerful of these critiques are Beth Richie's *Arrested Justice* and Angela Davis's *Abolition Democracy*. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach has also been criticized for implicitly requiring paternalistic intervention and regulation. Cf. Claassen, "Capability Paternalism," and S. Charusheela, "Social Analysis and the Capabilities Approach," for a review of charges of institutional and cultural paternalism inherent in Nussbaum's framework. Martha Fineman's ontological approach to vulnerability as a universal and constant characteristic of all human beings, and therefore the ground of a reconceived subject of rights, may lead to forms of state paternalism as well (see Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject"). Inspired by Fineman's perspective, the "Vulnerability and the Human Condition" Initiative, hosted at Emory University, is dedicated to envisioning models of state support and legal protection on the grounds of subjects' vulnerability conceived as a human feature.

- 2 For a critical review of these trends, see D'Cruze and Rao, "Violence and the Vulnerabilities of Gender."
- 3 Mbembe, "Necropolitics."
- 4 Didier Fassin offers a complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the Foucauldian notion of biopolitical regulation and humanitarianism. Fassin highlights that while the notion of biopolitics refers to the technologies of government and normalization of populations, humanitarianism also contributes to the production of differentiated meanings and values of human lives (see Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*).
- 5 Cf. the seminal text by Pithouse, "Producing the Poor," and a more recent critique of the "fight against poverty" by Cornwall and Fujita, "Ventriloquising 'the Poor'?"
- 6 This volume is the collaborative result of a week-long seminar, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance: Feminism and Social Change," organized by Judith Butler and Zeynep Gambetti at the Columbia University Global Center in Istanbul in 2013. The seminar was sponsored by the "Women Creating Change" initiative housed in the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University.