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Thinking through Vulnerability

Vulnerability and Critical Theory. By ESTELLE FERRARESE. Trans. Steven Corcoran. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018.

Philosophy and Vulnerability: Catherine Breillat, Joan Didion, and Audre Lorde. By MATTHEW R. MCLENNAN. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

Vulnerability Politics: The Use and Abuses of Precarity in Political Debate. By KATIE OLIVIERO. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

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The topic of vulnerability has been the subject of intense scholarly interest and work, especially in feminist theory. It circulates in academic and nonacademic contexts, spans many disciplines, including both applied fields and highly theoretical ones, and in philosophy in particular has been taken up in multiple subfields and approaches to the discipline. The concept's widespread appeal might stem from the sense that vulnerability is intensifying, or at least from a heightened awareness of it.[1] In any case, vulnerability's salience lies in how it names something significant about the world and suggests different ways that something ought to be addressed. That is, vulnerability's appeal lies in its normative pertinence or efficacy, in how the concept seems to hold the possibility of both diagnosing ethical failures and forging different, more adequate ethical responses to the injustices we witness and/or face.

What, however, is the significance of theorizing about "vulnerability"? Does philosophizing about "vulnerability" matter? How can it matter when we are faced with a barrage of systemic, interrelated harms and vulnerabilities whose realities do not seem to be affected by how we theorize them: the catastrophic effects of climate change, devastating global migration crises, wars and conflicts, persistent and intensifying misogyny and racism, and resurgences in antidemocratic, reactionary politics that exacerbate these problems and impede efforts at ameliorating them?

In their diverse approaches to their shared topic, Estelle Ferrarese, Matthew McLennan, and Katie Oliviero all make cases for why it does matter. Ferrarese and Oliviero both attend to the relationship between vulnerability and politics whereas

McLennan makes a metaphilosophical argument for the value of philosophy and philosophical theorizing about vulnerability. He proposes in *Philosophy and Vulnerability* that philosophy be reconceptualized in necessary relationship to vulnerability, which he defines as both "*finitude* or boundedness, and exposure to *accident* or luck" (McLennan, 17). Philosophy, therefore, is the activity of seeking self-consciously to master one's own condition of finitude without ever being able to do so fully (9). The philosopher should be someone "who *affirms human finitude . . . as well as the gulf between this finitude and a posited infinite*[,]" and still continually attempts to bridge that gap through thinking (8). Accordingly, McLennan wants to rethink the role of academic philosophers—as "something like the philosopher-as-social-worker" (3)—so philosophy is more egalitarian and accessible.

A core tenet in theories of vulnerability is that recognizing vulnerability as an unavoidable feature of our existence "tears at the ideological veil of neoliberalism" and its assumptions of idealized individualism and self-sufficiency (2). McLennan thus contends that if philosophy "ignores the vulnerability which is both its ontological precondition and its primary spur, it will risk lapsing into ideology—that is, a failure to understand the boundedness and the rootedness, in material interests and unfair advantages, of its position" (26–27). Attending to vulnerability, therefore, means diversifying what are recognized as "philosophical" perspectives on vulnerable human existence by engaging in a "kind of listening" that rejects such neoliberal suppositions (27). The majority of McLennan's book is occupied with examples of philosophizing about vulnerability from outside the discipline. These chapters (2–5) progress in a dialectic as McLennan analyzes how Catherine Breillat, Joan Didion, and Audre Lorde each explore the "anthropological constant" (19) that is vulnerability. The limitations of one thinker are surpassed by the next with Lorde offering the fullest account of human vulnerability. All three are academics and/or intellectuals, however. It would have been more fitting—more egalitarian—to consider how laypeople philosophize, especially about vulnerability, a gesture McLennan makes just briefly in the conclusion.

This view of philosophical activity, though, provides an interesting frame for theorizing about vulnerability and the relationship between theory and practice, and so for the other two texts. Ferrarese elaborates the intuition that part of the appeal of vulnerability is its normativity in *Vulnerability and Critical Theory* by defining vulnerability as "susceptibility to a harmful event, . . . [and] a breach of *normative expectations*" (Ferrarese, 12). She thus circumscribes it more narrowly than McLennan and most other theorists, as a normative wrong rather than a general condition of fallibility or susceptibility. This definition entails that the normative dimension is built into vulnerability and provides the basis for Ferrarese's worthwhile argument that vulnerability is inherently connected to the political. By expressing a potential or an existing moral breach, people in vulnerable situations demand response; they are acting politically. Ferrarese develops this account of vulnerability and the political (in part 4 of her text) against the backdrop of critical analyses of how vulnerability is theorized in the social sciences (part 1), contemporary philosophy (part 2), and critical theory (part 3).

The short fourth part presents the core of the argument, explicating three interconnections between vulnerability and the political. First, the political is defined by the deliberative mode, and "gets materialised in the discussion about what the social perceptions of vulnerability are, about what counts as exposure and what, by contrast, appears to belong to fate" (69); it is through political deliberation that determinations are made (and challenged) about which assertions of vulnerability are "sayable publicly" (69) and which are not, and about which are most severe and in need of response and

which are less so. Second, from vulnerability, political subjectivity emerges and is continuously constituted through seeking "to (re-)define institutions—normative expectations or public agencies and their policies—that expose, protect or fail to do so" (72). By becoming aware of and speaking about their vulnerability, people form their political subjectivity in relation to others, political entities, and the normative expectations they hold and/or seek to establish. Third, the idea of a political "common" is defined by and stems from "a phenomenon of learning and/or the experience of disagreement" about the problems people face (77). Ferrarese proposes that people's individual and partial experiences of vulnerability can only be the basis for learning, and forming a common, when they are the subject of political disagreement. Contestation and disagreement can lead one "to let go of something of one's experience of vulnerability, thanks to the resistance that others oppose to one's own interpretation of it[,]" and so can decenter that experience of vulnerability, show its limits, and potentially lead to the transformation of political subjectivity (80).

Ferrarese's account is not idealizing per se. She notes that not all vulnerabilities will be recognized, receive equal or adequate attention, or find the called-for response. Yet these recognitions feel too slight, the ambivalence of vulnerability as an object of political deliberation and political subjectivity eclipsed, and the picture of the political a bit rosy, especially when Ferrarese's theoretical exposition is juxtaposed with Oliviero's analyses in *Vulnerability Politics* of political strategies employing vulnerability. As an interdisciplinary feminist scholar, Oliviero in her work bears out one of Ferrarese's subarguments for coordination between the social sciences and humanities with respect to vulnerability. She also illustrates in careful detail how vulnerability is a *politicized* category (the object of intentional political strategy) and, thus, one whose value as a normative category is highly ambivalent. Ambivalence, as Oliviero uses it, captures "the interaction between risk, possibility, and complicity," for instance, the simultaneous danger and potential of assertions of vulnerability (31).

The bulk of Oliviero's text concerns the rhetorical invocation of vulnerability in US political debates over immigration, same-sex marriage, and abortion (considered in chapters 2–4). Oliviero analyzes how conservative activists strategically stage a theater of vulnerability concerning each issue, depicting often dominant groups and institutions as vulnerable and generating political affects that motivate policy shifts to protect those groups and institutions. As Oliviero continually documents, the called-for policy responses—such as border walls, intensified immigration surveillance, detention, deportation, restrictions and bans on abortion procedures, bans on same-sex marriage and adoption—exacerbate the precarity of the vulnerable groups who are construed as threats (for example, migrants, women seeking abortions, queer people). Although the particularities of each case differ, Oliviero elaborates commonalities in how reactionary conservative activists fashion a theatrical presentation of vulnerability: by crafting a sensationalized visual rhetoric of bodily vulnerability, by portraying vulnerability as self-evident and clear, by displacing attention from or substituting some vulnerabilities for others, and by selectively referencing history—all with the aim of provoking immediate affective responses.

These strategies are summarized in chapter 5, which identifies six "reflexes" operative in conservative vulnerability politics: 1. invocation of sentimental ideals (for example, of nation and citizen); 2. expression of outraged love and disgust; 3. display of the irrefutability of the suffering, vulnerable body; 4. construction of vulnerability as a normative status, as moralized helplessness; 5. presentation of vulnerability as essentialized and individualized; and 6. appeal for regulatory, disciplinary state response, which she

notes is also a major component of progressive vulnerability politics. These reflexes function to create a "biopolitical *threshold*" for sorting assertions of vulnerability, distinguishing between those that matter and warrant response, and those that don't (229). That is, these strategies prompt reflexive reactions that either constrict or bypass political deliberation about vulnerabilities. They are likewise moves that, in Ferrarese's terminology, constitute political subjectivities and a political "common," albeit one formed through politicized affects of disgust with difference and love of similarity rather than through disagreements that prompt learning and the decentering of people's own experiences of vulnerability.

Therefore, the kind of analysis that Oliviero offers is a valuable extension of the interweaving of vulnerability and the political for which Ferrarese argues, but it also acts as a rejoinder to that argument. One of the common refrains in critiques of theories of vulnerability is that there is no particular ethical response that follows simply from recognizing vulnerability.[2] As Oliviero's work reveals, that critique applies even more to political contestation concerning vulnerability: Yes, vulnerability is inherently political (insofar as the social relations through which people are vulnerable are necessarily also political relations), but its political, politicized nature simply calls for further critical analysis.[3] Normative demands stemming from vulnerability are indeed made on the political terrain, but there is no reason to expect that the political terrain is any more capable of meeting them because it includes discussion of "vulnerability" or that the ensuing critical analyses from the academy are any more likely to have an effect there than on ethical terrain. Oliviero makes that limitation clear by highlighting vulnerability's ambivalent effects in and on political discourse.

Despite their practical foci, Ferrarese and Oliviero both want a better concept of vulnerability. With the aim of greater theoretical adequacy, they each embed in their broader arguments critiques of how vulnerability has been conceptualized. Specifically, both question the focus of theories of vulnerability on the universality of bodily vulnerability. Critiquing Butler's account of the power of assembly, Ferrarese questions the political efficacy of people simply assembling as vulnerable bodies in a demonstration of that vulnerability and interdependence:

> But in what way would bringing to light a shared vulnerability . . . convince or force *in itself* the majority of the need to revise a law[?] . . . How can the performative affirmation of vulnerable bodies—as vulnerable as all others—produce anything other than a redundancy? How can it come to anything other than a confirmation of the existing? (Ferrarese, 42)

Vulnerable bodies in protest, qua bodies, signify only that they are vulnerable and can have little more political effect. Oliviero, in contrast, is concerned precisely with the effectiveness of visual depictions of the suffering body (such as the dismembered fetus) for conservative vulnerability politics: "reactionary social movements *depend upon* essentialist constructions of bodily vulnerability . . . [and] a visual vocabulary of powerlessness" (Oliviero, 51). Sensationalized visual representation of the vulnerability of the suffering body makes vulnerability seem clear and irrefutable. As such, it can be readily "extracted from the structures of power creating it," decontextualized, perceived as apolitical, and turned into "a floating signifier that is easily recruited for antidemocratic purposes" (239). Amplifying the vulnerability of the body as a political strategy only heightens the vulnerability of other, less visible, less readily perceived, and/or less morally acceptable bodies. For both, thus, the emphasis that theories of vulnerability place on bodily

vulnerability is misplaced. They reach the same conclusion from divergent starting points, nonetheless Oliveiro's argument effectively refutes Ferrarese's.

When reflecting on these concerns, all I could think about were the children separated from their families and held in detention at the US–Mexico border. Images and accounts of these children's experiences proliferated in the US media during the summers of 2018 and 2019: children held in overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions; children sleeping on cement floors in freezing cold temperatures, penned in by chain-link fences; children left alone crying while a stoic CBP officer stands by with his hand on his gun. Babies whose mothers cannot nurse them because they've been separated; those whose diapers aren't changed when they're soiled; the baby whose neck was black with dirt because her mother isn't allowed access to water or soap to bathe her; the baby whose uncle had to feed him from unwashed bottles; the mother who had to fashion makeshift clothing out of diapers to keep her baby warm when her clothes were soiled and CBP agents refused to help; the woman who'd just had a c-section and was unable to stand, holding her premature infant in a freezing cold, cement warehouse. It feels both necessary and futile to witness their bodily vulnerability. Their bodies, assembled not in protest but in need, make a normative claim even if that claim is simply "Let me be here. Let me restart my life," rather than, say, a more complex claim about US complicity in creating the economic, ecological, and political conditions that induce migration (and now willful abdication of responsibility for the consequences). The fact that invocations of bodily vulnerability can be used for the political ends that harm these families does not obviate the need to perceive their claims. So, where do we go from here?

In this context, at this political juncture, Oliviero's analyses strike me as simultaneously on point and superseded. Conservative vulnerability politics, in their crassness, have moved beyond creating a normative threshold for whose vulnerability matters based on innocence, helplessness, and dependency. These children are undeniably helpless and dependent, and yet their vulnerability is taken as occasion to injure them further. They are knowingly and punitively being traumatized. Oliviero's framework tells us what we intuit: that their vulnerability can be dismissed, minimized, or rationalized because sentimental ideals of nation and citizen, and outraged disgust at their "illegal" immigrant parents, quash possible sympathetic affects prompted by exposure to their vulnerability. What is centrally at stake in these conservative campaigns does not really seem to be vulnerability though, but rather, as Oliviero highlights, a moral certitude and self-righteousness so deeply entrenched that it involves making claims about vulnerability that defy reason and reality. Perhaps one of the implications of *Vulnerability Politics* is that political debate ought to abandon the terminology of vulnerability altogether. Vulnerability may be the language of normative demand, but the probability that the most pressing, justified demands will receive a hearing is rapidly decreasing when vulnerability becomes an inconsistently invoked rhetorical ploy.

What ought be retained, however, is the *practice* of learning through vulnerability, which returns us to the broader significance of theorizing vulnerability and the political in the face of overwhelming practical devastation and tragedy. McLennan aims to break open philosophy through the lens of vulnerability, recouping significance for philosophy by bringing the richness of philosophical modes of thinking out of the hermeticism of the discipline. He suggests that philosophy fulfills certain "basic human needs," such as "engaging in variously critical, affirmative, creative and above all self-transcending modes of thought" (McLennan, 149), and so calls for expanded "access to disciplinary philosophy" (153). I have no objections to this proposal but wonder if far more extensive critique of our disciplinary, professional activity is needed. Following McLennan, if

philosophy involves reckoning with our finitude and fallibility, then philosophical activity should entail regularly questioning the value of philosophical activity itself, making what *we* do vulnerable. In light of the political realities of vulnerability, aims of theoretical sufficiency and conceptual refinement concerning vulnerability—theorizing itself—may need to give way to more diverse modes of engagement. The centrality of vulnerability to politics and to philosophy that all three authors chart should lead theorists of vulnerability, and philosophers in particular, to sustained critique of the discipline and its norms, which all too often ignore "the boundedness and the rootedness, in material interests and unfair advantages, of its position" (McLennan 2019, 26–27).

How else might philosophy, and the academy, change or need to change? Might philosophy redefined in relation to vulnerability be philosophy oriented toward creating communities—of varying sorts, durations, and with varying aims—via dialogue with others? Might it be defined by the activity of thinking with others, beyond the conference and the classroom, to transform subjectivities and decenter our own (limited) perspectives on our vulnerabilities, both shared and not? Projects to teach philosophy to children and in jails and prisons are examples of how to diversify the site and nature of philosophical activity. How might it change what philosophy is and does, and change the discipline, if we regarded these forms of philosophical engagement, rather than the academic conference or journal article or typical classroom, as paradigmatic of what it is to do philosophy? And what would we have to change about our profession—for instance, the imperative to publish or perish for tenure, for status, for a sense of our own value—to bring other ways of doing philosophy to the fore? How would we have to reckon with our fallibility when undertaking new practices and engaging in new contexts in which we lack the mastery we may feel we have of our classrooms. My growing sense is that theorizing vulnerability may be merely academic, and, given its political import now, merely academic treatment of vulnerability is a failure to hear, see, and experience how the realities of vulnerability call us to act differently.

Notes

1 One could speculate about why vulnerability has had such widespread appeal, for instance, considering how theoretical concepts emerge from sociohistorical conditions or tracing their intellectual roots to other, related concepts and ideas. For example, see discussions in Lorey 2015; Cole 2016; and Ferrarese 2016.

2 I think this critique is misguided for a variety of reasons (especially because it fundamentally misinterprets those who develop accounts of ethics in relation to vulnerability, most frequently, Judith Butler), but it is made time and again. See Gilson 2021 for explanation.

3 I am using *politicized* to refer not to political awareness, a political tone, or to the process of making an issue public but, more narrowly, to vulnerability becoming the target of deliberate political *strategy*. The term *political*, on the other hand, has a broader sense—that of contestation, discussion, deliberation, and so on among people in public or concerning public matters.

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