

# 1.Introduction

- Etymology of vulnerability – roots in the Latin *Vulnus* – wound – Christian theology - Augustine – original sin
- Wounds heal – but vulnerability today is said to be ineradicable – Butler and many others claim it as that attribute which is most ontological to life – nobody can avoid death, injury, suffering
- My question – **is vulnerability a myth, like original sin; something we are convinced to believe in ways that manifest powers over us**
- My argument - there is a discourse of vulnerability – not quite a myth but a concept which does work for various forms of power – need to theorise it and be careful when using this term (see the article by Virokannas)
- Question of why it is only now that social science is addressing vulnerability as a concept and phenomenon – when it would seem to be so basic a social fact

## 2.The Biopolitics of Vulnerability

- Questions I posed in an article published in *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2012) – a critique of Judith Butler – academic context of a debate over the meaning of biopolitics and the legacies of Foucault for social and political theorizing
- Powerful on the US left where vulnerability has produced identity politics – people are encouraged to identify through their social wounds
- In critical theory vulnerability has a positive connotation today – no longer a condition to be hidden or denied – vulnerabilities are performed as qualities of selfhood – ‘vulnerable research’ is a new trend in social science
- The positivization of vulnerability is partly an outcome of changing gender relations – a pushback against patriarchy and repressed model of masculinity
- But not simply that – expresses the influence of biopolitics on political theory – though the meaning and use of this concept is debated – the complex implications of embodiment for social science
- Today I want to revisit this debate and think about it in context of the present – the world has changed – theory and knowledge has advanced – how does this debate look today in 2025?

# 3. The Trouble with Vulnerability

- None of this is to deny that vulnerability exists – some people are more vulnerable than others; exposure to suffering is not equally distributed
- We have increasing reasons to be concerned for the fate of the Vulnerable
- Neoliberalism has been on the rise since the 1970s – which has led to a gradual withdrawal of care for domestic populations by states and governments – a war on the welfare state – the vulnerable have been abandoned to their suffering
- Has major implications for social work and social democracy – justice and inequality are not priorities for neoliberal states – which promote inequality and injustice as realities of life – which leads to more inequality and injustice
- Self-care is on the rise but does not substitute for the support which vulnerable populations need to survive
- Resilience is the governing ideology of late neoliberalism – promotion of the idea that the state cannot save you and you have to care for yourself in all dimensions
- The political left has failed to offer any alternative – has no better image of how to organize society – has lost the argument over how to govern society
- This in spite of the reality that neoliberalism has also failed – not even economists believe in it any longer and are looking for what comes after it
- Zombie neoliberalism – lives on when it should be dead and buried

## 4. The Critique of Resilience

- Critique of Resilience as a neoliberal strategy in *Resilient Life* (2014); *The Neoliberal Subject* (2016); *Becoming Indigenous* (2019)
- Critique of the claim that vulnerability is inevitable and beneficial – the myth that the more we suffer the the more grow and become resilient
- However the rise of resilience as a solution to vulnerability is not simply a reflection of the power of ideology
- The world is changing – Anthropocene – collapse of democracy and the rules-based world order – war and insecurity are on the rise while societies fragment
- Knowledge is also developing – science has advanced – and security has been exposed as a dangerous myth – we no longer believe security is possible – and we are suspicious of the work it does, for regimes of power (Harrikari)

# 5. Ideology, Reality and Scientific Knowledge

- Science of resilience is also advancing in the life sciences and especially in neurobiology – belief is that we are programmed to be resilient as individuals, as peoples, and as a species; research into hormones, nervous systems and brains
- Difficulties of discerning the differences between ideology, reality, and knowledge – who to believe and how?
- The ideologues of resilience refer to reality and science to support their claims
- But understandings of reality and science are mediated by discourses and power
- Resilience functions to produce vulnerability – a lot of our exposure to danger is unnecessary and the state could do a lot more to protect people, reduce inequalities, and produce justice

## 6. Vulnerability in a Neofascist Era

- What is the future for the theory of vulnerability in a neofascist era?
- Worldwide shift to the extreme right – from neoliberalism to neofascism – shift from the love of profit to the love of power – elites which do not need more money – indeed which are willing to sacrifice it – but do want more political power – seeking validation – and have control over the masses
- My hypothesis – resilience does not need neoliberalism – it is an ideology of biopolitics – liberalism and fascism have always been related – so it is likely to be maintained under conditions of neofascism
- Neofascism is also biopolitical and is building on neoliberal ideas and practices, which includes resilience
- However Trump has already tried to ban the term vulnerability; along with other words (transgender, fetus etc.)

# 7. Losing Vulnerability

- Important to recognise that fascism was also a regime of care – a politics of care itself is not an answer to fascism – liberal fascism also produces and persecutes the vulnerable
- And fascism arises from vulnerability – as it did historically in Germany
- The vulnerable will not defeat fascism – requires a subject which believes in what it possesses and what it can do, not what it lacks and needs
- Another model of subjectivity – the subject of security – political eschatology and the apocalypse
- The destruction of old worlds are necessary for the creation of new ones

# 8. Conclusion

- Vulnerability is a loaded concept – its use as a discourse of power is as old as Christianity – we need much more critical work on the concept itself, as has already been achieved with the concept of security, in social science research
- Vulnerability politics are a dead end – productive of an identity politics which cannot manifest political change, progress or effective resistance to power
- Neoliberalism has profited from vulnerability discourse – enables the discourse and strategy of resilience
- We need research that addresses the needs of the Vulnerable while not investing in vulnerability itself as the method by which to reduce vulnerability
- Neofascism is real and also entails its own discourses on vulnerability
- Vulnerability is a troubled and troubling concept – which should be handled with care