Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance

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movement may be galvanized for the very purpose of establishing adequate infrastructure, or keeping adequate infrastructure from being destroyed. We can think about mobilizations in the continuing shantytowns or townships of South Africa, Kenya, Pakistan, the temporary shelters constructed along the borders of Europe, but also the barrios of Venezuela, the favellas of Brazil, or the barracasof Portugal. Such spaces are populated by groups of people, including immigrants, squatters, and/or Roma, who are struggling precisely for running and clean water, working toilets, sometimes a closed door on public toilets, paved streets, paid work and necessary provisions. So the street is not always the site that we can take for granted as the public ground for certain kinds of public assemblies; the street, as public space and thoroughfare, is also a public good for which people fight – an infrastructural necessity that forms one of the demands of certain forms of popular mobilization. The street is not just the basis or platform for a political demand, but an infrastructural good. And so when assemblies gather in public spaces in order to fight against the decimation of infrastructural goods, to fight against austerity measures, for instance, that would undercut public education, libraries, transit systems, and roads, we find that the very platform for such a politics is one of the items on the political agenda. Sometimes a mobilization happens precisely in order to create or keep the platform for

political expression itself. The material conditions for speech and assembly are part of what we are speaking and assembling about. We have to assume the infrastructural goods for which we are fighting, but if the infrastructural conditions for politics are themselves decimated, so too are the assemblies that depend upon them. At such a point, the condition of the political is one of the goods for which political assembly takes place—this might be the double meaning of "the infrastructural" under conditions in which public goods are increasingly dismantled by privatization, neo-liberalism, accelerating forms of economic inequality, and the anti-democratic tactics of authoritarian rule.¹

I begin, then, by calling attention to the infrastructural conditions of mobilization as well as the preserving of infrastructural goods as an aim of mobilization, but not because I will give an account of the infrastructural – I hope to do that another time. I do this here because I would like to rethink the status of embodiment and vulnerability within political mobilizations.

In effect, the demand for infrastructure is a demand for a certain kind of inhabitable ground, and its meaning and force derives precisely from that lack. So the street cannot be taken for granted as the space of appearance, to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, the space of politics, since there is, as we know, a struggle to establish that very ground. And Arendt is at least partially right when she claims that the space of appearance comes into being at the moment of political action. That is romantic notion of an embodied performative speech act, to be sure, since in any time or place that we act, the space of appearance for the political comes into being. It is not always true, of course – we can try to act collectively and no space of appearance is established, and that usually has to do with the absence of media, or particular ways that the public sphere is structured to keep such actions from appearing. A rendt clearly presumes that the

material conditions for gathering are separate from any particular space of appearance. But if politics is oriented toward the making and preserving of such conditions, then it seems that the space of appearance is not ever fully separable from questions of infrastructure and architecture.

What implications does this notion of supported political action have for thinking about vulnerability and resistance? Those are the two concepts that form the focus of this paper, and my task is to suggest a new way of understanding that inter-relationship. In a sense, we already know the idea that freedom can only be exercised if there is enough support for the exercise of freedom, a material condition that enters into the act that it makes possible. Indeed, when we

which it lives and thrives, we fail to make the best possible case for the various political ends we seek to achieve. What I am suggesting is that it is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that makes its own life and action possible.

As I will hope to show, we cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside of this conception of relations.

One clear dimension of our vulnerability has to do with our exposure to name-calling and discursive categories in infancy and childhood, indeed, throughout life. All of us are called names, and this kind of name-calling demonstrates an important dimension of the speech act.

We do not only act through the speech act; speech acts also acts upon us. There is a distinct performative effect of having been named as this gender or another gender, as part of one nationality or a minority, or to find out that how you are regarded in any of these respects is summed up by a name that you yourself did not know? We can, and do ask, " (e) 0.2 2 0.2 () 1 9

felicitous. For instance, one could take a marriage vow, and this act could actually open up a zone of possible sexuality that takes place quite separately from marriage, understood as the publ

choose. Choice, in fact, comes late in this process of performativity. And then secondly, following Sedgwick, we have to understand how deviations from those norms can and do take place, suggesting that something "queer" is at work at the heart of gender performativity, a queerness that is not so very different from the swerves taken by iterability in Derrida's account of the speech act as citational.

So let us assume, then, that performativity describes both the processes of being acted on, and the conditions and possibilities for acting, and that we cannot understand its operation without both of these dimensions. That norms act upon us implies that we are susceptible to their action, vulnerable to a certain name-calling from the start. And this registers at a level that is prior to any possibility of volition. An understanding of gender assignment has to take up this field of an unwilled receptivity, susceptibility, and vulnerability, a way of being exposed to language prior to any possibility of forming or enacting a speech act. Norms such as these both require and institute certain forms of corporeal vulnerability without which their operation would not be thinkable. That is why we can, and do, describe the powerful citational force of gender norms as they are instituted and applied by medical, legal, and psychiatric institutions, and object to the effect they have on the formation and understanding of gender in pathological or criminal

implicitly depends upon an infrastructural condition that quite literally supports the acting body. This idea of "support" is quite important not only for the re-theorization of the acting body, but for the broader politics of mobility – what architectural supports have to be in place for each of us to exercise a certain freedom of movement, one that is necessary in order to exercise the right to public assembly. In the same way that we claim that the speech act depends upon its social conditions and conventions, we can also say that the performance of gender more generally depends upon its infrastructural and social conditions of support. This bears implications for a general account of embodied and social action, but also for understanding the bodily risks that women take walking on certain streets at night, assembling in public squares (the sexual assaults in Tahrir Square would be an example), and transgendered people risk in walking on the street or gathering in public assemblies.

All public assembly is haunted by the police and the prison. And every public square is defined in part by the population that could not possibly arrive there; either they are detained at the border, or have no freedom of movement and assembly, or are detained or imprisoned. In other words, the freedom to gather as a people is always haunted by the imprisonment of those who exercised that freedom and were taken to prison. And when one arrives in public or common spaces with radical and critical views, there is always an anxious or certain anticipation that imprisonment will follow. Sometimes we walk, or run, knowingly in the direction of prison because it is the only way to expose illegitimate constraints on public assembly and political expression. In Gezi Park, some who were assembled were detained, and others were hurt. The lawyers who came to help those who were detained were themselves detained; and sometimes the medical workers who came to help the injured were themselves subject to injury. And yet a

to decimated or disappearing infrastructures, economic supports and predictable and well-compensated labor. We are then not only vulnerable to one another – an invariable feature of social relations – but this very vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency which changes the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject.

Of course, there are many reasons to be opposed to vulnerability, but in the final set of my remarks, I want to argue against the idea that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance. Indeed, I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment. I know that speaking about vulnerability produces resistance of various kinds, and not just the kind of political resistance that I hope to show requires vulnerability as part of its very structure. There are those who worry that vulnerability, if it becomes a theme or a problem for thinking, will be asserted as a primary existential condition, ontological and constitutive, and that this sort of foundationalism will founder on the same rocky shores as have others, such as the ethics of care or maternal thinking. Does a turn to vulnerability seek to reintroduce those particular modalities of thinking and valuing back into public discourse – is it smuggling in discounted paradigms for reconsideration?

The resistance to vulnerability is also sometimes based on political grounds. After all, if women or minorities seek to establish themselves as vulnerable, do they unwittingly or wittingly seek to establish a protected status subject to a paternalistic set of powers that must safeguard the vulnerable, those presumed to be weak and in need of protection? Does the discourse of vulnerability discount the political agency of the subjugated? So one political problem that

from psychoanalysis. And yet, do our political objects to vulnerability make us into psychoanalytic fools? And do our psychoanalytic affirmations of vulnerability make us complicit with political positions we do not condone?

When we oppose "vulnerability" as a political term it is usually because we would like to see ourselves as agentic, or we think that better political consequences will follow if we see ourselves that way? If we oppose vulnerability in the name of agency, does that imply that we prefer to see ourselves as those who are only acting, but not acted upon? And how might we then describe those regions of both aesthetic and ethics that presume that our receptivity is bound up with our responsiveness, a zone in which we are acted upon by what we find at the same time that we act upon it in certain ways? Does the opposition to vulnerability also imperil a host of related terms of responsiveness, including impressionability, susceptibility, injurability, openness, indignation, outrage, and even resistance? If nothing acts on me against my will or without my advanced knowledge, then there is only sovereignty, the posture of control over the property that I have and that I am, a seemingly sturdy and self-centered form of the thinking "I" that seeks to cloak those faultlines in the self that cannot be overcome. What form of politics is supported by this adamant mode of disavowal?

As I have tried to suggest by calling attention to the dual dimension of performativity, we are invariably acted upon and acting, and that this is one reason why performativity cannot be reduced to the idea of free, individual performance. We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavour to change or make them on our own. In this way, we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose. In a parallel way, I want to

suggest that there is a dual relationship to resistance that helps us understand what we mean by vulnerability. On the one hand, there is a resistance to vulnerability that takes both psychic and political dimensions; the psychic resistance to vulnerability wishes that it were never the case that discourse and power were imposed upon us in ways that we never chose, and so seeks to shore up a notion of individual sovereignty against the shaping forces of history on our embodied lives; on the other hand, the very meaning of vulnerability changes when it becomes understood as part of the very practice of political resistance.² Indeed, one of the important features of public assembly that we have recently seek confirm that political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, and that plural or collective forms of resistance are

self-interested appropriations of "vulnerability" by dominant groups, sometimes by colonial powers, who claim to be made unacceptably "vulnerable" by those who seek equality, democracy, the end of colonialism, or reparation for past injuries. In those instance, it is their privilege which has become "vulnerable" to being undone by increasing demands for equality and freedom. This use of "vulnerability" effaces the condition of vulnerability in which precarious populations live, and constitutes an ideological seizure of the term to expand and

Of course, I am aware that I have used "resistance" in at least two ways: first, as the resistance to ulnerability that characterizes that form of thinking that models itself on mastery; second, as a social and political forrthat is informed by vulnerability, and so not one of its opposites. I have suggested that vulnerability is neither fully passive nor fully active, but operating in a middle region, a constituent feature of a human animal both affected and acting.³ I am thus led to think about those practices of deliberate exposure to police or military violence in which bodies, put on the line, either receive blows or seek to stop violence as living blockades or barriers. In such practices of non-violent resistance, we can come to understand bodily vulnerability as something that is actually marshaled or mobilized for the purposes of resistance. Of course, such a claim is controversial, since these practices can seem allied with self-destruction, but what interests me are those forms of non-violent resistance that mobilize

already underway, dismantling the resistance to vulnerability in order precisely to resist.

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¹ See Wendy Brown's work on the privatization of public goods.

² For this double sense of resistance, see Jacqueline Rose, The Last Resistanceondon: Verso, 2007. Hayden White, "Writing in the Middle Voice" in