

## **POLITICS, JUSTICE AND THE VULNERABLE SUBJECT: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FEMINIST THOUGHT**

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**Abstract:** The present article argues that the main contribution of contemporary feminist theory on vulnerability stems from the distinction of two possible kinds of vulnerability: an ontological vulnerability and a vulnerability linked to various processes (social, cultural, economic and juridical) of vulnerabilisation. This contribution is not limited to the critical and deconstructive level. As a positive proposal, it advances in the direction of an individual which, recovering its own relational, embodied, "fleshy" and situated dimension, abandons the illusion of its own sovereignty, accepts its vulnerability like an opening up to others, and thus also accepts the responsibility for an open and democratic dialogue and the need for institutions inspired by an "enabling" conception of justice (cf. Young 1990).

**Keywords:** vulnerability, precarity, privilege of ignorance, epistemic responsibility, enabling justice.

### **Introduction**

Different contemporary feminist theoretical approaches, particularly the care

ethics of Kittay (1998) and Tronto (1993; 2013), studies on precarity (Butler, 2006; 2009; 2015), the "social flesh" approach of Carol Bacchi and Chris Beasley (2002; 2004; 2012), the philosophy of the law of Martha Fineman (2008), the ecofeminism of authors like Val Plumwood (2002) and Stacy Alaimo (2009), have focused their attention on the subject of vulnerability. This thought moves on two separate yet closely interrelated fronts (see, in particular, Gilson, 2013). On the one hand, we have the unveiling of forms of vulnerabilisation, of "precarity" (Butler, 2009), or of "pathogenic vulnerability" (Mackenzie, 2014), socially induced to maintain the current hierarchies of power that exist among the various social groups, focusing attention on the methods used to produce them and also on the way in which they have changed over recent decades due to globalisation and the advent of neoliberal politics. In this direction, especially through criticism of modern rationalism and liberal ontology, they help us understand the reasons why what Martha Fineman calls the "myth of autonomy" (Fineman, 2004) is so hard to die, so resistant

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and solid in our imaginations, so capable of distracting our gaze as much as possible from our shared vulnerability to the point of actually ignoring it.

On the other hand, these reflections move on the front of the elaboration of a different way of thinking politics which starts from our needs, from the body, from its dependence on the natural and social environment, from the tangible conditions that make social reproduction possible. The underlying idea, from this point of view, is that only by recognising our shared ontological vulnerability and acknowledging the way in which the removal processes that have allowed it to be ignored have worked, putting the same forms of social reproduction at risk, can we also succeed in eliminating those forms of inequality that now justify the inferiorisation and social disadvantage of certain groups, those groups that social sciences define as “vulnerable” groups (see Ferrarese: in this issue). It is my contention that it is from the relationship outlined between these two possible kinds of vulnerability that the essential contribution of the feminist theory on this matter stems, a contribution which is not limited to the critical and deconstructive level.

As a positive proposal, it advances in the direction of a individual which, recovering its own relational, embodied, fleshy and situated dimension, abandons the illusion of its own

sovereignty, accepts its vulnerability like an opening up to others, the responsibility for open and democratic dialogue and the need for institutions inspired by an “enabling” conception of justice (cf. Young, 1990).

### **Ontological vulnerability and “privilege of ignorance”**

Modern political philosophy has proposed an image of the individual by nature autonomous, self-sufficient, free and independent. In representations of classical and contemporary contractualism, in particular, the individual appears on the political scene *fungorum more* – to use a well-known Hobbesian expression –, ready to go and perfectly mature. From the descriptive viewpoint, the modern vision of the individual rests on the ascertainment of the separateness of people. This vision of human nature, which corresponds to an undoubtedly prevalent empirical reality and therefore to a widespread experience, has been used to sustain a normative vision in which individual freedom is presented as the protection of the space of action and of individual choices, and political society is conceived as an artificial reality stemming from a contract, a voluntary action, with which individuals positioned symmetrically in relation to each other decide to subject themselves willingly to laws to protect their private lives and their assets (cf. Maillard, 2011).

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This political conception of the individual and of human nature corresponds, at an epistemological level, to a vision of the subjects as independent as they are isolated, as autonomous as they are self-sufficient, the rationality of whom is considered as a capacity to detach themselves not only from links and from tangible situations in which people find themselves, but also from their temporally finite and materially conditioned bodily reality. As written by Plumwood (2002: p. 42), modern rationalism has conceived every form of link as a possible source of error. The known object is extraneous to the knowing subject. The latter is able to change and act on the known object, but not vice versa: the subject remains closed off from the known object, a timeless, detached mind, separate and sovereign compared to nature, immune from every form of affection and change through contact and relations with the outside world. The illusion on which the sovereign subject is erected is at the basis of a distorted perception of the human condition which leads to an overestimation of personal security, to an underestimation of his dependency and interconnection with others and with the environment, and to a failure to recognise his vulnerable personal condition. Rational and monological subjects have therefore been able to imagine themselves free and independent, and to remove their intrinsic vulnerability, projecting that vulnerability onto

something else outside of and below human, and consequently excluded from the sphere of their privileges. The autonomy of rational subjects is, from this point of view, the result of a privilege that enables the offloading of damages, consequences and burdens deriving from the course of action that they alone are able to decide to undertake, onto others. Joan Tronto talks about “privileged irresponsibility” (Tronto, 1990, 1998; but see also: Gilson, 2011; Zembylas, Bozalekb and Sheferc, 2014), while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) had used the expression “epistemological privilege of ignorance”, two concepts which appear closely connected because it is from ignorance, from not knowing or, better, from being able to allow oneself the luxury of not knowing certain aspects of life and the human condition, that a failure to undertake responsibility derives.

As sustained by the contemporary epistemology of ignorance (cf. Tuana, 2004; 2006; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Gilson, 2011; 2013, Logue, 2013; Code, 2014), the privilege enjoyed by those in power derives not so much from their knowledge – as we tend to assume –, but from the fact that they are able to ignore part of reality, from the borders traced between what we have to know and what can be excluded from the objects of knowledge. In this vision, ignorance must not be considered so much as a lack of knowledge

and, consequently, of power (people today usually see power and knowledge as being linked), as a force which blocks knowledge, which occupies its space and more or less explicitly affirms a need to not know (cf. Code, 2014: 154). According to the epistemology of ignorance, power is manifested not only in the construction of knowledge, but also, in another way, through the definition of what is not knowledge, in tracing the boundaries between what is worthy of being known and what is not, either because it doesn't exist or is purposely not perceived. In this vision, ignorance is not an expression of bad epistemic practice, but more of "a substantive epistemic practice" in itself (Alcoff, 2006: 40). Like knowledge, ignorance is a social construction and even "actively sought after, consciously produced, strategically deployed, ferociously consumed, and carefully maintained" (Logue, 2013: 53).

The main instrument used by modern thought to erect that boundary between human and non human which has been essential in order to maintain the privilege of being able to ignore corporeity, meaning what makes us vulnerable and exposed to others at all times, has been the use of dualism, in the various forms in which it can be presented: nature/culture, body/mind,

subject/object, reason/sentiment, male/female, able/disable, socio-cultural forces/materiality<sup>2</sup>. Dualism was the foundation for the centrist conceptual structures that have been hegemonic in the West: androcentrism, ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, which have, in turn, legitimised different forms of racism, sexism, colonialism and speciesism. Dualism – as highlighted by Val Plumwood (2002: 101) – is not a simple dichotomy: it is not a mere distinction, but a form of distancing and disassociation between the elements that are separated, so much so as to generate an authentic ontological rupture between them, a radical discontinuity between the group which identifies the centre and its other which is not just separate, but placed on the lowest steps of a hierarchical order. The separate other, disassociated from the centre, is marked as inferior. Once inferiorised, and set at a distance, it can easily appear to be inessential. It can be ignored or used instrumentally. Therefore, dualism produces inequality, dominion and de-responsibility on the moral front, in relation to that which and those who have been inferiorised. The inferiorised other is also vulnerabilised, via exclusion from the distribution of the advantages of social cooperation and the weight of burdens which

<sup>2</sup> The imperative of the deconstruction of dualism and of its impoverished interpretation of reality is at the centre today, in particular, of the so-called "New Materialist Feminism". In this recent philosophical perspective, this second wave of feminism has erroneously given in to the

temptation of dualism, in the moment that it wanted the women to be moved "from the category of nature to the kingdom of culture" (Alaimo, 2008, 239, cit. in Wingrove, 2015). On the meaning of the recovery of materiality and biology of the new materialist feminism, see also Casalini (2015).

are not recognised as such. What Plumwood describes as a “hyper-separation” makes it possible to brand the other in order to reserve him or her a differentiated and unequal treatment: the different nature of men with respect to women, like colonisers with respect to those colonised, has been used to justify the exclusion of women and those colonised from the enjoyment of particular things, exonerating men from having to feel empathy and excluding a reason for having to discuss existing inequalities. The clear separation of the boundaries between the sovereign subject (male, white, proprietor, heterosexual and able-bodied) and his other has been a tool for the legitimisation of his dominant position and, at the same time, the reassurance of his non-dependence and invulnerability (cf. Plumwood, 2002: 102).

Among the mechanisms that can help eliminate our vulnerability and build the boundaries that distance it from the fragile construction of the autonomous, free, self-sufficient and independent subject, as shown by Joan Tronto's political ethics of care (1998; 2013), is the devaluation of all those forms of practical knowledge and of activity aimed at

caring for and taking responsibility for those who are not self-sufficient, and the marginalisation and relegation to the private sphere of all those asymmetric relations which implicate affective attention and interest in the other in order to satisfy physical or affective needs. Considering caring activities as natural and irrelevant from the political point of view or in terms of productive work, and entrusting them to unpaid work by women, man was able to exercise patriarchal power, seen as the fruit of a natural superiority, for a long time, and this enabled him to gain an advantage from women's taking on of responsibility for children, the sick and elderly and even his own daily life, without granting them any form of public recognition. These caring activities, while having finally been denaturalised and considered as a job<sup>3</sup>, still continue to be done by women, especially women who are poor, immigrant and members of ethnic minorities, while society adopts complete disregard for, and a fundamental desire to ignore, just how hard this work is and how crucial in terms of social reproduction. This disinterest and this desire not to know are functional to maintaining a position of advantage by those who are

3 The request for recognition of the “non-natural” nature of care activities, so that they could be listed as falling rightfully within the “work” sphere, was one of the main claims of materialist feminism (cf. Delphy, 2009) and of Marxist feminism (cf. Federici, 2012) in the Sixties and Seventies. The naturalisation of this work has sustained the pretence which sees it as falling into the

sphere of subsistence (without an exchange value) and has, at the same time, justified its low remuneration, considered as a mere supplement to the salary of the man of the house, the only person really capable of supporting the family, as well as the temporary, part-time and unqualified nature of most of the activities that fall within the care sector.

privileged and, at the same time, the disadvantage of those who do not occupy that position: the person needing care who does not have a privileged social status will see his or her needs underestimated or ignored, while the caregiver will be forced, as highlighted by Fineman (1995; 2004 and in this issue) and Kittay (1998), into a form of derived or secondary dependency, with consequent restriction of the space for opportunities of wellbeing.

The same attitude of domination and exoneration from responsibility is taken by modern man towards the broader kingdom of nature, in which woman has been traditionally included. In this case too, the social privilege works in such a way as to isolate its beneficiaries from the damage that it causes to the environment, making it hard for them to see the way in which it affects particularly those who are weaker, poorer and disadvantaged (see Fineman: in this issue). In this way, the effects of the atmospheric pollution produced by human activities in advanced industrial societies do not pose an equally distributed risk. Its effects do not fall on the whole population in the same way: the rich are usually affected less than the poor. So, for example, it isn't true that "poverty is hierarchical, while smog is democratic", as claimed by Beck (cit. in Plumwood, 2003: 84). The map of smog of Sidney, for example, shows a close relationship

between the most polluted areas and the poorest areas (cf. *ibidem*). Even global warming has a different effect on the poorer segments of the population, as emerged in Chicago in summer 1995, when an exceptional heatwave caused 500 deaths in the districts where residents couldn't afford air conditioning (cf. *ibidem*).

### **The differential distribution of vulnerability**

The removal of the datum of our ontological vulnerability and of our belonging to a global ecological community, or the possibility by modern man to ignore this reality, is linked, therefore, to the construction of imaginary boundaries which work and have long worked to keep human beings separated from the rest of the animal world, rationality from corporeity, the mind from the body, the person who enjoys full citizenship rights from one who exists in a condition of dimidiate citizenship, the pretence of being the owner of oneself and one's body and, consequently, in control of oneself, from the individual in need of "contention", public from private, culture from nature. These boundaries, which – as we will see – do not rest only on the forms in which knowledge and ignorance were built, and therefore only on cognitive dynamics, but also on affective dynamics which influence the feelings aroused by certain bodies or situations, have allowed modern human beings to cultivate the illusion of

their own invulnerability while attributing vulnerability to particular individuals and groups. We can see this as a process in which the dominant group hoards opportunities, either purposely or without being aware of it (Tilly, 1998; Anderson 2013). This generates a differential distribution of precarity or vulnerability – as observed by Judith Butler (2009). In this perspective, vulnerability becomes not a universal characteristic, but a negative, stigmatising feature, which justifies and has historically justified paternalistic behaviours.

To take into account the difference evoked thus far between ontological vulnerability and vulnerability produced via differential distribution, Judith Butler – starting from *Frames of War* (2009) – distinguishes between *precariousness* and *precarity*. Precariousness is that form of vulnerability universally shared by all human beings, and also characterising non-human animals, which has to do with our bodily, fleshy nature, which makes us needy of food and a roof over our heads, and makes us vulnerable to violence, to injury. By virtue of the body, which, according to Butler (2014: 58), is “synonymous with ‘mortality’, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘action’”, human animals are exposed to each other from birth and need to build with others networks of trust and support. Exposure to others makes us vulnerable to violence (physical and moral) as

well as to contact and caresses: for Butler – and also for Cavarero (2007; 2014) – vulnerability does not refer exclusively to the negative dimension of wounds and damage, and to a lack of power, but also to the positive dimension of care and love. Our very survival depends on the political organisation of social conditions which guarantee interdependence and proximity. It is our exposure to others which allows us to live and experience the deepest and most important feelings in our life.

The link that precariousness, our dependency and interdependency determine is not voluntary and consensual, does not pass – according to Butler – from the mediation of a moment of will and deliberation: “it precedes the contract, and is often effaced by those forms of social contract that depend on an ontology of volitional individuals” (Butler, 2009: xxvi). To a certain extent, because our ontology is a social ontology, and our being is always exposed to others, to social regulations and to the political and social structures historically given, we can never know precariousness if not in the forms of precarity. Vulnerability is, therefore, universal in the form of precariousness and, at the same time, particular in the form of precarity. As individuals, we are diversely positioned in relation to the experience of vulnerability, “it cannot be properly thought of outside a differentiated field of power and, specifically, the differential operation of norms of recognition” (Butler, 2006: 44).

It is not just the physical and mental differences between individuals and the networks of social relations that we are part of that determine our diverse vulnerability. Butler attributes the differential experience of vulnerability not only to the effects of specific networks of social and political institutions, but also to the effects of regulatory standards, perceptive schemes and intelligibility, as well as to historically variable affective structures, through which we experience ourselves and our bodies. Media portrayals also make an essential contribution to these emotional and perceptive structures today, used to create particular affective states in the public opinion. The media portrayal of vulnerability is one of the tools used to exercise contemporary biopower. Thanks to the way in which our perceptive and emotional schemes work, we mostly tend to remove the universal character of vulnerability to attribute and distribute it differentially, so that certain lives are recognised as worth being lived, while others do not receive the same recognition, are not recognisable and recognised as lives, are not considered worthy of mourning and tears, and consequently become more easily subject to violence, remaining more easily lacking in protection and care. The regulations that support our perceptive, emotional and cognitive schemes become, in this way – according to Butler and to Sedgwick, Tronto and Plumwood –, the

means used to socially justify, in terms of common sense, what Iris Marion Young (1990: chap. V) would call a “hierarchy of bodies”, which decides the unequal distribution of essential things, which is therefore both a symbolic and tangible matter. This hierarchy of bodies is maintained not only by rational arguments and discussions, but also by our emotions: the objects towards which disgust and empathy are directed, for example, are not immune to the perpetuation of forms of inequality through the reification or sentimentalisation of the other – as also emphasised in the work of Martha Nussbaum (2001; 2004; 2013). This differential distribution of vulnerability, which works through processes of “othering”, is what Butler calls “precarity”. Precarity and othering are an essential part of the defensive dynamics entered into to ward off the fear of vulnerability, dynamics that always contain a dose of symbolic or tangible violence towards the other and are supported on the basis of particular affective infrastructures. These processes take on variable and historically determined features, but differential distribution strategies of precarity are always entered into, according to Butler, in the governance of a population. Current neoliberal policies have contributed to creating new forms of vulnerabilisation and precarity through the rhetoric of individual choice, the consequent

attribution to the individual of responsibility for his/her personal condition and the progressive dismantling of the social protection network provided by the welfare state. Called upon to be the manager of him/herself and responsible for his/her own self-sufficiency, in a context in which neoliberalism destroys the very possibility of the self-sufficiency at economic and social level, the individual remains sentimentally attached to this ideal<sup>4</sup>, even if it cannot be achieved, undergoing a psychic transformation determined by a growing state of anxiety and of “moral failure” (cf. Butler, 2015: 15).

**The embodied, relational and vulnerable subject, between epistemic responsibility and politics**

Contemporary politics have opposed the imagery created by modern philosophy, a social and political imagery which conceives autonomy as independence, stigmatising dependency, which sees freedom as an absence of ties and conceives rationalism as achievable only if the subject is capable of detaching him/herself from his/her situation and looking at the world from nowhere, with an “establishing imagery” – to use the

terminology of Castoriadis (1991) –, which is formulated via the critical distancing from the idea of a sovereign, atomistic, egotistical subject, whose knowledge derives from an attitude of complete detachment and abstraction with regard to the known object.

This distancing has consequences on numerous levels. The first – and this comes as no surprise due to the reconstruction proposed here – is the epistemological level: there is a debate on whether there is just one way of knowing, which is that of the detached spectator, devoid of all passion, which can but produce, due to its distance and separateness from the known object, an impersonal and impartial vision, equipped with a claim of universal validity. The dimension of the distance of the knowing, universal and abstract subject, in relation to the known object, that distance which guaranteed invulnerability, is now replaced by that of a situated subject, which has always been placed in the environment and in interaction with it. The knowledge is now inevitably connected from the position that the knowing subject occupies as a body in space: it is this positioning that makes knowledge possible while limiting it at the same time. I can acknowledge my experiences, even to myself,

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<sup>4</sup> Butler specifically refers to the theory of affections drawn up by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) (cf. Butler, 2015b: 15).

only if I do not see myself as an isolated individual; as Anne Sellar wrote: “as an isolated individual, I often do not know what my experiences are” (cit. in Code, 2016). For Wittgenstein too, Lorraine Code reminds us, “knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement” (cit. *ibidem*).

The epistemology of ignorance, which acknowledges no responsibility towards what is outside its cognitive interests, is replaced by the reference to an unavoidable “epistemic responsibility” (Code, 1987) which has to make us critically assess the circumstances in which knowledge (including that of a scientific nature which we usually consider neutral) is produced and cultivate a form of “epistemic vulnerability” (Gilson, 2011; 2013), which is presented as an antidote to the closure on which the pretence of invulnerability of modern man rests. Invulnerability built on non-knowledge and ignorance of the other rests on the creation of ever-new inequalities and prevents the understanding of the conditions of our very existence, placing it in danger. Switching from this conception of the subject to another vision does not mean simply changing a conceptual scheme of reference, because – as Lorraine Code explains – revisionist conceptual schemes are also effective at practical and tangible level, in that they are capable of putting a conceptual apparatus into place which infiltrates into the

social order and can upset the hierarchical structures that hold it up (cf. Code, 2006: 20).

Abandoning fantasies of invulnerability, built on rigid closures and separations, means arriving at a point where we feel morally and politically responsible for listening to the perspectives of the different social groups, giving voice to marginal subjects, abandoning the pretence of an unrelated sovereign subject, and the perceptive and emotional schemes that have sustained the privileges of the dominant subject, to imagine a form of dialogical rationality attentive to the context and open towards diversity. This can be helped by a “pedagogy of epistemic vulnerability” (Logue, 2013) and a “critical pedagogy of emotions” (Zembylas, Bozalek and Sheferc, 2014) which cultivates in individuals the desire to know and open up towards others, discussing consolidated and reassuring truths and overcoming negative emotions linked to stereotypes or reactions of fear of the other, which makes us see the uncertainty, insecurity and doubt that lead us towards the other in search of solidarity and dialogue as strengths rather than weaknesses.

“Epistemic vulnerability” and “critical pedagogy of emotions” seem to be essential conditions for democratic life itself. Habits founded on the privilege of epistemic ignorance, whether they concern the privilege of whiteness, obligatory heterosexuality or

sexism, prevent full and equal social cooperation, interaction and mutual learning, contributing to fuelling intolerance and closure towards others. Defeating these incorporated and interiorised schemes of action, which influence behaviour without our being aware of it, is not easy, but it is essential within a democratic society. It is of particular interest for democracy to correct epistemic injustice in order to guarantee that equal and free participation and that equal respect that are fundamental in order to gain a cognitive and cooperative advantage from differences (cf. Anderson, 2006). This is particularly true if we adhere to a conception of democracy which is not restricted to the moment of the majority vote or to the moment of the resolution, but is seen as a cognitive research process in which an essential role is played by the pluralism of prospects, the friction and confrontation between these and the resolution as a mental experiment which puts different solutions to the problems that occur to the test at imaginative level, trying to prefigure the consequences. In this vision, which leads us to smudge the borders between ethics, political philosophy, social sciences and epistemology, the wealth is made up of experiences and imageries of resistance (Medina, 2013), capable of developing epistemic virtues which allow us to look at things *differently*. They offer interpretative resources via which to subject the

knowledge acquired to a fallibilistic test, forcing us to maintain an attitude of humility and open-mindedness.

Democratic epistemic interaction not only perfects our practices, it also expands our imagination and our sensitivity. Thus democracy finds itself in a position which should make it a natural ally of which Iris Marion Young (1990) calls an “enabling” conception of justice, meaning a conception which extends way beyond the distributive schemes of the liberal theories of justice and comprises the effective possibility for everyone to participate, express their needs and, even before this, develop individual capabilities for effective and productive social cooperation and communication, starting from the cognitive and affective capacities and progressing through to “hermeneutic responsibility”, meaning the obligation to look at personal limitations and epistemic vulnerability, to maintain an openness towards others which takes mutual positioning into account (Medina, 2013).

Starting from the body, and from its vulnerability, should induce us to remember our position determined in space and time, the start and the end of every life, birth, illnesses and death, the inevitable changes in body and mind over time, our everyday bodily needs, at material, social and affective level, fatigue, suffering, love, joy and our belonging to the natural world. An “enabling concept of justice”,

which takes the datum of corporeity, and consequently its needs, seriously, along with the diversity and the ties that indissolubly bind us to and make us dependent on the environment, should push us towards what Joan Tronto describes as a “caring democracy” (2013), a democracy in which the responsibilities of care and social reproduction are no longer allocated in such a way that the more privileged can ignore the work, burden and costs that they implicate. In this sense, starting from vulnerability means thinking about a policy which is able to reinvent the welfare state, not take it apart, in a democratic and not paternalistic direction, and which is able, at the same time, to cope with the limits of development, inaugurating a dialogue with the natural world that no longer relegates it to a passive condition as an infinitely exploitable and available resource.

Some of the attempts at inaugurating another, different “establishing imagery” underway today consist in the important alliance between the feminist movement and the environmentalist movement, which has taken place in numerous countries, starting with action to create a coalition policy which – as

explained by De Chiro (2008) – revolves around the “needs linked to the support of everyday life”, that is what contemporary Marxist feminism defines “social reproduction”. This need to refer back to life’s most immediate needs is expressed also in the manifestation and spectacularisation of vulnerability, sometimes in the form of nudity (think of the protest groups Bare Witness and Baring Witness, the photos taken by Spencer Tunick to draw attention to environmentalist battles over global warming<sup>5</sup>), often used recently by various social movements as an instrument of resistance (see also Butler, 2015), to draw attention to our interdependence as physical creatures and our dependence on specific environmental and material conditions. The new forms of vulnerability induced by neoliberal policies, with the dismantling of the welfare state and the precariousness of employment, have put an increasing number of people at risk of precarity, who, according to Butler, by taking part in recent demonstrations all over the world, from Plaza del Sol to Tahrir Square, Syntagma Square, and Zuccotti Park, have, with their bodily presence in public

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5 Stacy Alaimo writes: “When Spencer Tunick, for example, posed hundreds of people on a melting iceberg to protest global warming the term used to articulate people and place on the Greenpeace website’s account of this event was ‘vulnerability’: “Without clothes, the human body is vulnerable, exposed, its life or death at the whim of the elements. Global warming is stripping away our glaciers and leaving our entire planet

vulnerable to extreme weather, floods, sea level rise, global decreases in carrying capacity and agricultural production, fresh water shortages, disease and mass human dislocations (“600 Strip Naked” 2007)” (Alaimo, 2009: 23). More generally, see: Alaimo, 2010; Beasley and Bacchi, 2012.

spaces, expressed the demand for better social, economic and political living conditions (cf. Butler, 2015b). The very same politicisation of vulnerability, through its assumption and performative riappropriation (cf. Darling, 2009), has been deployed more and more times in many different places, the last one being in March 2016 in the Calais refugee camp, by those asylum seekers who sewed their lips and held cartels saying “We are humans!” to protest against their “bare life” (Agamben, 1998) conditions in the camp. In all these cases, the activist's body, and the spectacle of his vulnerability, is used a “fleshy” weapon or tool that activates affective forces and so can be used – as Knudsen e Stage write (2015: 89) – as a “soft power” or “biopolitical medium” in order to create through imagination new forms of relationships between victimised and non-victimised bodies.

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