

## »Confessing a passionate state ...« – Judith Butler im Interview

In der internationalen wie deutschsprachigen Debatte zum Thema »Verletzbarkeiten«, zuder das vorliegende Schwerpunktheft der feministischen Studien beitragen will, bilden die Überlegungen Judith Butlers einen wesentlichen Bezugspunkt. Sabine Hark und Paula-Irene Villa haben deshalb im Email-Interview im Juli 2011 nachgefragt: Knüpft ihr Verständnis von »Verletzbarkeit« an spezifische politische und soziale Probleme an? Was genau wäre die geschlechtertheoretische, die darüber hinaus feministische Pointe einer systematischen Anerkennung von Verletzbarkeit als allgemein-menschliche Bedingung? Lläuft Letzteres nicht auf eine eigentümliche Anthropologisierung hinaus, die etwa poststrukturalistische und auch feministische Theorien gerade vermeiden wollen? Welche konkreten politischen Artikulationen bilden die (Negativ-?) Folie für eine feministisch wirksame Anerkennung von Verletzbarkeiten?

SH/PIV: From a chronological point of view, we find that your most current deployment and examination of the concept of vulnerability connects with the notion of the post-sovereign subject which you developed in your books *Excitable Speech* (1997) and *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997). How would you frame your interest in the notion of vulnerability?

JB: It is true that after 9/11, I sought to understand the particular ideal of impermeability that seemed to be governing state proclamations and discourses. The idea was to show that the U.S. could not be penetrated, destroyed, or injured by those who made incursions from elsewhere. The proclamations of war, nationalism, and revenge all seemed to produce the effect of an impermeable and masculine subject, one who would be defined against vulnerability; indeed, one who would expropriate vulnerability to others. At the time I thought it was important that the U.S. understand itself as injurable, even though I deplored the attacks that happened there. In fact, it seemed to me that only by starting with the premise of equal injurability could a global politics emerge that would be committed to ameliorating forms of assault such as those that were committed against the U.S., but which more often than not are committed by the U.S.

I also want to consider that one way of managing populations is to distribute vulnerability unequally among them. In this way we can talk about precarious populations, and think about political strategies that emerge from precarious conditions. And we can also continue to think, especially during times of war, about the uneven grievability of populations, depending on whether they are targeted or defended, or whether they are considered more or less dispensable. It

is important to note that when such redistributive strategies abound, then other populations, usually the ones orchestrating re-distribution itself, posit themselves as invulnerable, if not impermeable, and without any such needs of protection. This approach takes vulnerability and invulnerability as political effects, unequally distributed effects of a field of power that acts on and through bodies. And we can see how certain populations are effectively ›feminized‹ by being designated as vulnerable, and others are declared ›masculine‹ through laying claim to impermeability. These are, of course, not essential features of men or women, but processes of being gendered, the effects of modes of power that have as one of their aims the production of gender differences. And one thing we can note is that the masculine position is effectively built through a denial of its own constitutive vulnerability.

SH/PIV: Feminist theory has a long-standing tradition of analyzing the state as masculine. Could you comment some more on how your analysis relates to this tradition?

JB: Of course, feminist theory is to be credited with introducing the values of vulnerability and receptivity into moral and political thinking, but it would be an error, in my view, to understand these as distinctively feminine characteristics. If we were to do that, we would be accepting the disavowal of vulnerability that men sometimes undertake, a disavowal that might be said to constitute certain forms of highly defended forms of masculine subject formation. In France, the critique of the welfare state is sometimes formulated in terms of »the maternal state« whereas the call for security and discipline is understood to express the values of the »paternal state«. This kind of language is amusing and instructive, but it would be a mistake to take it as true. Whether articulated by feminists or anti-feminists, it is a form of essentialism that makes use of the most conservative understandings of gender difference to describe different modes of valuation. For instance, we might think of care-taking or even an ethics of care as something that women develop or that characterizes certain forms of emotional labor that women perform, but I gather that the strong feminist argument would be precisely that it should not be only women who perform these tasks, and that such tasks finally ought not to be gendered at all. I am not sure we can argue for equality through any other means. And I would be unhappy with a theoretical language that locks men and women into conservative »roles« and fails to undertake any gender trouble at all as we rethink the future of gender and equality alike.

SH/PIV: So would we. Still, we want to insist and ask you to comment on how relevant the concept of vulnerability is for feminist theory and practice. There is, for example, a long-standing and crucial feminist tradition of theorizing and fighting sexualized violence, there are important debates on care-work as a gen-

dered issue, and there is of course the core issue of women's economic, social, emotional, and legal dependency as one of the main effects of unequal heteronormative gender regimes. Does the general acknowledgment of vulnerability as a condition of humanity do away with the more specific issue of women's dependency and its negative connotations? To put it even more strongly: Is the recognition of vulnerability as a basic human characteristic a counter-argument to the feminist quest for autonomy?

JB: As I said, feminist theory has to be credited with showing the importance of vulnerability to thinking about ethics and politics alike. It has always been assumed within feminist theory that one reason to criticize models of mastery and dominance is that they fail to value other important modes of sociality: co-habitation, dependency, vulnerability, care, responsiveness, and alliance. One could say that these latter values are associated with feminine domains, and to some extent that is true. But even if that is descriptively true in some contexts, that is not the same as saying that it ought to be prescriptively true only in those contexts. After all, feminists wish to see those values more broadly shared, which means that they are not the exclusive or primary characteristics of women, or political sensibilities of feminism. Only a feminism that disperses those values outside of the restrictive terms of gender will find itself effective in transforming the matrix of values that inform contemporary modes of governance. I am not sure we need to seek recourse to the »human« as the opposite of gender. If we think about gender, it is clear that each of us »receives« a gender prior to any question of what we want or will. Paradoxically, that means that »receptivity« is there, at the basis of all gendering, whether masculine, feminine, or some other mode. The question that becomes important, though, is how we think about modes of agency, resistance, and transformation on the basis of this primary receptivity or vulnerability to a social world we never made. Here I want to suggest that receptivity and vulnerability are actually the presuppositions of agency and resistance, and not their opposite. In fact, it is only when we are sufficiently impressed by the injustice of some situation in the world that we are moved to change it. But if we are, from the start, unimpressionable, if we refuse to receive impressions of the world in which we live, we cannot begin our analysis and we cannot begin our resistance. Indeed, if you think about the condition of »outrage« it would seem that there is some exploitation or injury that impresses us as radically unacceptable, and that moves us into the street or into some other form or site of political action to register our outrage and our demand for change. In this way, we might understand politicization as motivated by an intelligent vulnerability, a transformation of receptivity into action where action does not »take the place« of receptivity, but sustains it as its most vital condition. We can only know and register the world by taking it in, by being open to what happens, even when sometimes what happens is barely livable, since it is from that very sense of openness that outrage and the demand

for change becomes possible. But when we make that demand, we do not change ourselves from receptive to impermeable; on the contrary, we sustain that receptivity as a condition and font of intelligence for social and political action.

SH/PIV: How would you characterize this conceptualization of vulnerability in relation to theories of recognition (Anerkennung) on the one hand and psychoanalytic notions of dependency, interrelatedness and intersubjectivity, as developed for example by Jessica Benjamin, on the other? Also, in the early 1980s Carol Gilligan developed her then very influential theory of a gender-differentiated morality, which attributed to women empathy and the wish not to violate and destroy relationships. Do these ideas have any affinities with your concept?

JB: I certainly have affinities with both Jessica Benjamin and Carol Gilligan. There is no doubt. I think that Benjamin offered an important account of why we cannot really understand the Hegelian concept of reciprocal recognition without understanding interdependency. I believe I wrote about this in an essay entitled »Longing for Recognition« where I engage Benjamin's work. Here, I'd only say the following: if we require recognition in order to gain social existence, we are dependent not only on others who may recognize us, but also on the very terms by which recognition is conferred. Sometimes those terms are enlivening and enabling, but sometimes the very terms we require in order to exist do injure to us, or turn out to be a form of effacement. In other words, if I must be either a woman or a man to gain social recognition, and neither term actually does »recognize« me, then there is an incommensurability between the terms of recognition and their capacity to confer recognition. Lacanians might call this »misrecognition« but for me, it is a sign that we are vulnerable to social categories and norms. Vulnerability might be the name for this »requirement« to be recognized and the kind of exposure to injury that is implied by recognition and misrecognition alike. Moreover, social categories and norms impinge upon us; have their way with us, prior to any choice on our part, so we are available and vulnerable to modes of interpellation prior to any consideration of choice or critical reflection.

Carol Gilligan's work is important to me because she has formulated a mode of ethical responsiveness that is not reducible to a calculation. She seeks to understand modes of responsiveness that cannot be easily formalized (Kantian) and that cannot be reduced to a kind of bargain or deal (»I will do for you only on the condition that you do for me the same«). In this way, she indicates that relationality is crucial to who we actually »are« and so helps to formulate a social ontology that moves us beyond possessive individualism and crude utilitarian calculations. I am also most interested in her recent work on listening, since our ability to respond ethically to others depends finally on whether or not we can register the demand or call that is made to us. Listening is a way of registering this demand. It may also be a way of signaling a kind of openness to the other, if not vulnerability.

SH/PIV: The German sociologist and anthropologist Heinrich Popitz differentiates between »Verletzungsmächtigkeit« (the potential to injure) and »Verletzungsoffenheit« (the potential to be injured). Various German feminist thinkers have used this distinction to analyze relations of domination between the genders as genus groups as well as between men and women as individuals (sexualized violence, for instance). Do you find this an instructive differentiation?

JB: Let me first ponder the question of the relationship between injurability and vulnerability. I want to make sure that we do not confuse these terms, or use them as synonyms for one another. Vulnerability includes all the various ways in which we are moved, entered, touched, or ways that ideas and others make an impression upon us. Indeed, we would not be capable of being moved by a story or a film without first being impressionable in some way; that means that we are altered by what moves us, and that we are not fully intact or self-enclosed at such moments. It would seem that vulnerability is a way of referring to the capacity to be wounded. But at least in English, and perhaps in German as well (Verletzlichkeit, Verletzbarkeit), it is also a way of indicating one's dependency on another, a set of institutions, or a circumambient world to be well, to be safe, to be acknowledged.

The body is an important site of what I understand as vulnerability: Even if vulnerability cannot be associated exclusively with injurability, all responsiveness to what happens, including the responsiveness of those who document the losses of the past, is a function and effect of vulnerability – of being open to a history that is not told, or being open to what another body undergoes. We can say that these are matters of empathy, but I want to suggest that part of what a body does (to use the phrase of Deleuze, derived from his reading of Spinoza) is to open onto the body of another, or a set of others, and that for this reason bodies are not self-enclosed kinds of entities. They are always in some sense outside themselves, exploring or navigating their environment, extended and even sometimes dispossessed through the senses. If we can become lost in another, or if our tactile or visual or auditory capacities comport us beyond ourselves, that is because the body does not stay in its own place, and because dispossession of this kind characterizes bodily life more generally. It is also why we have to speak sometimes about the regulation of the senses as a political matter – there are certain photographs of the injury or destruction of bodies in war, for example, that we are often forbidden to see precisely because there is a fear that this body will feel something about what those other bodies underwent, or that this body, in its sensory comportment outside itself, will not remain enclosed, monadic, and individual. Indeed, we might ask what kind of regulation of the senses – those modes of ecstatic relationality – might have to be regulated for individualism to be maintained as an ontology required for both economics and politics. This is also why certain forms of public documentation in print and media, but also in

museums and art spaces, or even the art space of the street, become important in the battle against historical oblivion.

Coming back to your question on Popitz, and sexualized violence: It is always possible to distinguish analytically between the potential to injure and the potential to be injured, but I am not sure that a psychodynamic or relational approach to the question can ever truly separate the two. If we want to correlate certain groups with the power or potential to injure and others with the power and potential to be injured, we end up with typologies of persecutors and victims that fails to take into account how these two dimensions of human social life are intimately tied up with one another. For instance, those who seek to monopolize the power to injure do so precisely because they know that they are injurable, and they seek to deny, disavow, or project that very injurability. Similarly, all kinds of injuries can be inflicted if one maintains that one is exceptionally vulnerable to being injured. So perhaps we need to understand how these two dimensions of human vulnerability and destructiveness are articulated in relation to one another. Otherwise, I am not sure we can understand some of the most prevalent modes of rationalizing violence.

Vulnerability can also name the way of confessing a passionate state. When we are vulnerable to others, and we say so, we are for the most part letting them know that we are open to them, and that, as a result, we are at risk. Letting them know we are at risk is a further way of being vulnerable or showing vulnerability. But in these cases, showing one's vulnerability can be a way of petitioning another, or making an appeal to an institution, or even a state structure or mode of governance. Of course, vulnerability can be shown or not shown. And when any of us start to announce our impermeability, we give good reason for others to suspect that we are most interested in keeping our vulnerability from being seen. So the showing of vulnerability is not the same as vulnerability. Indeed, vulnerability can be most intense precisely at the moment when it is not shown; and when it feels to be particularly unmanageable, it becomes something that we not only feel we must hide from others, but also from ourselves. So we have to consider that the effort not to »show« vulnerability can be one that we do not understand that we are doing, since our own investments in not knowing that we are vulnerable are more determinative of our action than any deliberate strategy we might devise to hide our vulnerability from others. In other words, I cannot know it precisely because I cannot stand it, and if I were to stand it, then I would not be able to survive that recognition (or so the structure of the fantasy goes).

Let me ponder on the political dimension of this argument: When militaristic and nationalist discourses seek to convince a population of its impermeability (»we have borders that will not be crossed by anyone we do not choose«), they are not only deliberately or strategically seeking to hide a vulnerability that they share with any other group of embodied creatures, a dimension of somatic life itself, but they are also trying to forget or foreclose a sense of vulnerability that

has already been deemed unlivable. This is particularly curious in the case of the U.S. since we could say that the population there did mainly survive the attacks of 9/11/01, (in German: 11/09/01), and so already passed through the experience of an unwilling and destructive assault that came across its borders and mocked the sovereignty of its land and air. But if such an assault exposes a vulnerability that is unlivable and unmanageable, then there has to be a quick and convincing way to override or retract the obvious display of national vulnerability. Thus, the claim, »we are invincible and impermeable« is meant as a way to deny the unliveable experience that we have already survived. But instead of acknowledging that vulnerability and creating a politics from that condition (one that would see that the U.S. population belongs to a global community all of whose members are equally entitled to protection from such assault), the response was to become more assaultive, to unleash violence on Afghanistan and then Iraq, and now to fly destructive drones into nearly every Muslim country on the earth. By becoming ever more assaultive, the nation defines and makes itself through the terms of war, allocating vulnerability elsewhere, and reserving impermeability for itself.

SH/PIV: You seem to apply the concept of vulnerability equally to persons and nations. Is this the case? Wouldn't it be important to differentiate between entangled persons and entangled nations? In sociological terms: Is it possible or even useful to apply vulnerability on the micro-, meso-, and macro-level?

JB: I understand the category of the »subject« to traverse both individuals and nations, and I tend to question the way in which the social field is divided up into individuals and groups. If we think about subject formation, the social is already at work, which means that individuals are formed through social categories that include gender and nation, among others. So the »group« is neither a simple collection of individuals, nor is it a different kind of subject. It is already there as part of the social condition of subject formation, orchestrating the primary field of infancy, including language acquisition, modes of identification and dis-identification, and even somatic self-understanding. At the same time, it seems to me that nations tend to focus on individuals as iconic, as representing or, better, embodying national ideals and fantasies. I am not sure a nation can even articulate its own self-understanding without an iconic investment in certain kinds of »individuals«. In both cases, the individual is socially invested and interpellated, and cannot really be thought, even in its inception, without that investment and interpellation.

SH/PIV: Vulnerability carries many denotations and it is used in a wide variety of academic discourses (medicine, ecology, information science, psychology, economic development, poverty studies, climate studies, security studies, geography, risk management, among others). It also has strong ontological, anthropological,

and ethical connotations, which we also find in your usage of the term. How would you circumscribe your usage of the term in light of these other deployments and connotations? On the same point, do you see a danger that the anthropological meanings of vulnerability might lead to political conflicts being depoliticized and reframed as human universals instead of as historically induced? What are the theoretical advantages of the notion of vulnerability versus notions such as oppression, dependency, and dominance?

JB: I think that in my work the term vulnerability is most often linked to precarity and it raises questions, time and again, about whether I am talking about an existential or »shared« condition or an effect of power that is differentially distributed and a condition that is disproportionately induced in some populations rather than in others.

But my hope was actually to make another kind of argument, one that shows that the existential domain of bodily vulnerability is defined as a vulnerability to social and economic power. I understand that those who want to say that vulnerability is fully »induced« by modes of governance, neo-liberalism, and tactics of precaritization would be unhappy with any reference to a domain of vulnerability that might persist outside of these particular modes of inducing and regulating injurability and precarity. I understand as well that there is a suspicion that if we refer to something like vulnerability as a somatic dimension of life, that we are normalizing or naturalizing a condition that is historically produced, and that must be challenged through political means. My response is not to say: there is an autonomous domain, and we have to accept it. My response is rather that this debate is mired in a dichotomy that has to be rethought. If we understand the body as vulnerable, we understand it always as vulnerable to something (we might say, philosophically, that vulnerability always takes an object, or that vulnerability has an intentional structure in the phenomenological sense). If the body is from the start given over to social norms and modes of power, then we cannot understand the body without understanding its fundamental openness to, and dependence on, social and political modes of existence. It is one thing to say that from the start, the body is gendered, medicalized, entered into a legal regime. That is true. And in that sense, there is no body that is not from the start mired in power. But if we want to understand the meaning of »being mired« and give it specific content, then we have to understand that one reason that there is an exploitation of bodies or an assault on bodies is that bodies are open from the start to social and political modes of organizing needs, including food and shelter, including shelter from violence. In other words, if the body were a self-contained monad, or if it were strictly individual and discrete, then it would not be possible to understand the way that bodily dependency is itself exploited, the way that vulnerability is abused, or the way in which the grounding requirement of a social world can be systematically refused. This dependency is not some disposition or capacity – it is

a relationship to what is outside, to a world of others, of food, of care and shelter, the very material condition of life and persistence. We understand dependency when we speak about infancy, but I want to suggest that dependency is precisely that which we never outgrow; indeed, it defines us as social beings, that is, beings whose persistence and survival depends upon social structures—including norms, interpellations, institutional requirements, economic structure, including the systems for the distribution of goods and the production of needs.

In this way, if we understand bodily vulnerability as a mode of being open to social structures in order to persist and to survive, then the body is defined as a social relation that has to be brokered in one way or another. There is no existential body that precedes the political and social body; on the contrary, the vulnerability of the body is precisely a vulnerability to the social and economic world; as a result, it is the site of our exploitation and injurability, but also our passion and persistence.

SH/PIV: In Germany there is a strong political and socio-economic framing of »vulnerability« as discussed in the context of economic and social precarity (»Prekarisierung«, »die Prekari«). As some critics have pointed out, this framing is itself dubious: Though meant to be critical of neo-liberal forms of economic exclusion, it turned out to be part and parcel of a (primarily sociological) defensive rejection of vulnerability by academic elites. Considering the variety of constellations in which the concept of vulnerability is deployed – politics (e. g. NGOs working for women's / children's / migrant rights), religion, economy, philosophy, etc. – how would you politically contextualize your framing of the notion? We suppose that, for example, sexual politics, especially the so-called AIDS crisis, might be important here.

JB: The term »precaritization« seeks to describe those processes that effectively abandon populations, rendering them disposable, and leaving them without any protections against poverty, violence, and political disenfranchisement. The process takes place through many means, and it is in many ways a process without a subject. In this sense, it follows a certain Foucaultian understanding of power. It seems to me quite possible to return to the early Marx, though, to ask about the sensuous existence of human creatures, and to see how the needs for survival relate to the social and economic organization of life. Marx's example was the worker who finds him or herself in the position of working more only to find his or her position increasingly poor. So the question that had to be critically raised was whether the current mode of organizing economic and social life works to satisfy the basic needs of the human animal, or to deny and thwart those needs, thus supporting the sustainability of some human animals at the expense of others. The very concept of class structure depends upon this understanding that the rich not only have basic needs for subsistence satisfied, but that they live

in a world in which new needs are being produced and satisfied at an astonishing rate at the same time that working and poor populations are confronted with increasing threats to the sustainability of their lives. All this is very true, but it seems to me that it is also based on an illusion on the part of the owners of production and the elite class that they can protect themselves against ever being precarious, even though we know that sudden stock market disasters have plunged the rich into prison, suicide, or lives of extreme restriction. Indeed, the idea that precarity only afflicts the poor or the stateless or those abandoned by neo-liberal regimes subscribes to the fantasy that precarity can be neatly and effectively distributed. But this was the error of U.S. militarism that I mentioned above. And it is an error that reappears again in those explanatory models that think that precarity is not a possible threat to any embodied creature dependent on social and economic structures for its very survival. That illusion can be destroyed in an instance, and very often is, especially when the very rich are struck by natural disasters or war (as were the wealthier people working in the World Trade Center that day), or are destroyed by the very financial schemes, which were supposed to function as the sign of their permanent non-precarity.

It is true that I started my own reflections on which lives are grievable, and how grievability is differentially distributed after considering the struggle of AIDS activism to make public the value of lives lost from AIDS (through acts of public mourning), and the value of lives that deserve not to be destroyed by AIDS (through petitions for more aggressive research that could be made affordable across the globe). And this perspective has entered into my thinking about the war dead in both *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*. It enters again in my most recent thinking about Palestine / Israel and how the value of life is differentially treated. In each of these cases, we could say that lives are unequally exposed to injury and destruction, and that this arrangement follows from a plan to expropriate injurability and destructibility to some populations, and to safeguard (in what can only be an illusory fashion) impermeability and non-destructibility for the aggressor. In some ways, I am thinking through the consequences of a classically liberal proposition, namely, that all lives ought to be treated equally, and that how a life is treated after its death is a further instance of its value. But because I insist as well that there is an unequal distribution of grievability (under certain social and historical conditions, some lives are more grievable than others), I am making a second claim that is inextricably linked to the first: we must struggle for new forms of economic, social, and political life that institutionalize the principle of the equality of the value of life and overcome its unequal distribution. Of course, that second principle tends to rely on a human / animal distinction that I am trying to address in some of my other work. But here, at least, I can say that it is only as human animals that we live and die, and so our animality is implicated in our social and political existence, especially when the issue is the matter of our collective persistence and survival.