

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Introduction

Hello everyone, in our course on Vulnerability Studies, we will begin with an examination of the key concepts which will help us understand whether they are occurring in literary or cultural texts and the theoretical frames through which we will view vulnerability. The word vulnerability itself derives from the Latin source which means injurable or *vulnus* which means to wound and to be vulnerable is to be open to injury, that is our primary definition, to be vulnerable is to be open to injury. Why are we vulnerable? We are vulnerable because we have bodies that can be broken, destroyed, injured in some form or the other. We are rendered vulnerable because of certain advantages or disadvantages we may have depending on the contextual settings in which we live which basically goes to say that our bodies which are injurable are dependent upon certain conditions in which these bodies live, in which we exist. Vulnerability is intrinsic to us. It is intrinsic to us because of our biological processes, aging for example which comes to all living forms, aging which produces its own bone, intellectual, cognitive disabilities, dysfunctionalties.

Our bodies are prone to diseases, various infections. Our bodies are prone to natural disasters, tsunamis and earthquakes and floods and fires and cyclones, etc. Our bodies are open to, injurable to, prone to human-made disasters as well. For example, since we are in the age of climate change and climate crisis, we are all vulnerable to quality of air that we imbibe the pollution in the water, the kind of contaminated food we eat.

Broadly speaking, this is ontological vulnerability. By ontological vulnerability, we mean vulnerability that accrues to us, vulnerability which is integral to and an aspect of our existence in a body. It is universal and applicable to everyone. What do we mean by ontological? Ontological is the state of our existence itself and where because we are made of flesh and blood, because we are made of nerves and blood vessels, any of those systems can be potentially speaking open to injury, vulnerability and such. Despite the fact that vulnerability is an intrinsic and a general feature of all humanity, there are three aspects to this general condition.

That is, what I am trying to say is that while vulnerability is something applicable in a universal way, there are very specific contexts also that we need to be aware of. Any individual is vulnerable depending upon their access to say healthcare, their access to wealth, education and context like that, which means the socio-cultural economic contexts in which individuals live can either amplify or diminish vulnerability. So, for example, if you have not got adequate coverage in say medical insurance, you do not have access to welfare institutions and processes. If you do not have access to education, these impact our vulnerabilities. So, what we are looking at here is vulnerability proceeding from the socio-cultural and economic context in which humanity lives.

The other aspect which we have already covered in some detail a couple of minutes ago is that individuals are vulnerable because we possess bodies. Now bodies are different, physiologies are different, abilities are different, levels of fitness are different. So those are vulnerabilities that emerge from the fact of being in a body. So, note how we have looked at it, two aspects, the corporeal as in the physical body which gives us its own intrinsic vulnerabilities, our contexts in which we live which provide us or amplify or diminish or negate our vulnerabilities. So, for example, if you are wealthy enough to afford high class medical care, medical attention, then certain kinds of vulnerabilities are diminished.

You can always consult a good doctor when you are ill, you can acquire the best medication available in the market because you can afford it and so on so forth. Likewise for education, likewise for diet, for example when the doctor says you need to have a, you need to take a high protein diet, it effectively means that you should be able to afford a high protein diet. And when we say high protein diet, it clearly points to a very close relation between social economic conditions and dietary conditions which will determine then how vulnerable your body is to certain kinds of anemia or potentially lethal medical conditions and the measures you can adopt to diminish those conditions. So, we have looked at two aspects. The third aspect is a little more complicated.

You can be vulnerable because you belong to a particular collective community, because you are a member of a particular ethnic group which is targeted by another section of the population, targeted by the state, etc. The United Nations actually has a list of what it calls the most within quotes “Most Vulnerable Groups”, MVGs. This is collective vulnerability. So, to just reiterate, we move from corporeal individual as in bodily vulnerabilities because of who we are. We move from there to social and economic and cultural conditions in which we are embedded which produces diminishes or accelerates, amplifies our vulnerabilities.

And finally, vulnerabilities that proceed from our membership in particular collective

groups. Our vulnerability therefore depends on our embeddedness as the social theorists would call in circuits and structures of power like the state, like corporate institutions or welfare measures. You are vulnerable because you have a body, but you are also vulnerable because your body is subject to, controlled by state as in the government, corporate, as in the market and companies and the law, the medical and other institutions. So, the question then is what has been done in human evolution, in human cultural history to counteract against the vulnerabilities we all possess? The answer is practically all of our social institutions have come up because human society has worked to diminish individual or collective vulnerabilities. Take for example the insurance system.

Why and how did the insurance system evolve? The insurance system evolved as a way of ensuring that the risk factors are reduced, the risk from theft, bodily injury, accidents, financial loss, etc. It means in short that the entire system of insurance was invented to diminish potential risk and insurability to natural causes, disasters, accidents by like fire or theft, disease. All of us know that medical insurance is practically mandatory now because the cost of medical help, medical services would be so exorbitantly high that if you are not covered by insurance, we as individuals cannot afford to pay for health services. So, insurance systems as a social, cultural, economic institution evolved to diminish potential risky factors that can give you vulnerabilities of different kinds. The medical system of course is the most obvious social system that has emerged, evolved because bodily vulnerability is intrinsic to all of us.

The entire field of medical knowledge, the entire field of medical services become modes of trying to understand, control our bodies, safeguard it, safeguard against diseases and infection and restore it to as working actually condition as possible. So, when you have a particular medical condition, you have the flu, you go take your antibiotics, you recover. So, the medical system is there to ensure that your body which has been rendered vulnerable due to the illness has been restored to a degree of functioning normalcy. By functioning normalcy what we mean is we are trying to restore, we are trying to restore our bodies to a more or less normal method of working. Then the third, where does one go if for example your house has been broken into and things have been stolen, you go to the police, you go to the court.

The law and justice mechanisms have evolved so that it curbs deviant behaviour, theft, violence and things like that. The legal system exists to make sure that individual liberty, individual property would be safeguarded and a measure of peace restored in the social order. The government, the state exists so that individual and collective vulnerability can be diminished. Alright? So, I have given you four examples here, insurance, medical systems, the state's law and order apparatus and finally the government itself. All of these exist to guard against or diminish our individual and collective vulnerabilities.

I now want to move on to something else and this is to do with questions of shared vulnerability. Collective or group vulnerability emerges because we share our identity with others. We belong to a particular community, we belong to a particular ethnic group, we belong to a certain linguistic group etc. So, we fit into a particular group but the group as a whole is threatened, is at risk. Then, collective or group vulnerability emerges because we share a physical ecosystem with others, we live in the same setting, we live in the same apartment building, we live in the same, what shall we say, residential area, we go to the same schools and colleges, we work, we use the public transport system, we use the roadways, we share a physical space with others.

And in the process if something goes wrong in the apartment building, if something goes wrong on the road such as something like a traffic accident happens, the bridges collapse, there is a particular serious disaster which has cut the road into two like sinkholes which happen in many places. When we share a physical ecosystem with others, anything that goes wrong with the ecosystem potentially threatens several of the people who reside in that particular unit. So, if it is a building that catches fire, if it is a road that collapses, if it is a park that has been shut, the physical ecosystem which is shared by several people then produces a certain form of shared vulnerability. So, notice I began with individual vulnerability because we have bodies, to now looking at shared vulnerabilities. Third, we share our institutions and cultural practices with others.

We celebrate festivals together, we have cultural practices which we understand, share with others, we have celebrations, rituals and weddings and things like that which we share with others. So shared vulnerability or collective vulnerability emerges because life is not lived in isolation. Life is lived with other lives. So shared vulnerabilities, basic rubric is this. We now move on to something else.

An individual or group of individuals can be oppressed, harmed or even killed because they belong to a particular group. Because they belong to an ethnic or linguistic group, they can be targeted, they can be oppressed, they can be imprisoned, sometimes even killed which is what we call ethnocide or genocide. What are we looking at here? What we are looking at here is vulnerability emerges from a system of social relations. Vulnerability is rooted in the body, yes, but it also emerges from a system of social relations where one particular group might seek to oppress or control somebody else. If you know the history of human genocides, most of it is from such a context that one group wants control over the other, one wants to take away their land, take away their property, take away their lives and in the process of taking control like this, they oppress, they kill, they injure the other group.

Vulnerability emerging from a system of social relations is about power dynamics. Who seeks to control whom? Who seeks to oppress whom? It is the exact counterpoint to social congeniality and solidarity where for example, we may be members of a particular group because we share common interests. But in social groups as we now know, there are certain rituals of participation and if you do not participate, you are slowly pushed out of that group. Solidarity, congeniality is based on a recognition of mutual interest, mutual survival strategies, mutual benefit, but it also means you must be willing to accept the norms of that particular social group. And if you do not fit that particular social group, you are slowly evicted from that group and it makes you more vulnerable to that group itself. Contemporary cancel culture is a good example of this.

Our next stage in understanding of shared vulnerability is moving beyond the human. We share vulnerability with plants and animals as well. We share an ontological vulnerability, if you recall the term, with other life forms because they also possess bodies, they also are injurable, they can be hurt, broken, beaten, bruised, killed. Although all are injurable, they are not all injurable in the same way.

What is our understanding then of vulnerability here? Vulnerability is linked to suffering. The question to be asked is, do animals and plants suffer the same way as humans do, as in, we and plants and animals sharing the same form of injurability? That is the larger ethical or moral question that emerges from vulnerability studies. So, if you want a one-line definition, we began with a one-line definition, if you recall, that vulnerability is to be open to injury, to be injurable. Vulnerability is the vulnerability to or openness to suffering. To be injured is to suffer, to be injurable is to be potentially suffering.

So we continue thinking about this a little bit and we move to questions of collective vulnerability for other reasons. Just as collective vulnerability can emerge from questions of collective memberships, like I said, part of a social setting, other life forms are also vulnerable because they share a particular group, a particular collective identity. For instance, certain species of animals have been deemed to be edible, others have been deemed to be domesticable, others have been deemed to be usable or destroyable. For example, think of the classification of agricultural animals or pets or vermin. What have we done when we classify animals like that? Domesticated animals, agricultural animals, milch animals, then labouring animals, animals as pets, animals instrumentalized as, for example, seeing eye guide dogs, police dogs, animals which are there for entertainment purposes like animals that used to be employed in circuses.

What we are looking at is a categorization of animals depending on how we see them, how we deem, how we perceive them. In critical social theory and in literary theory, particularly emerging after posthumanism, this is called speciesism. Speciesism is the categorization of certain animals as usable in certain ways by humans and that we have

the right to exploit them, we have the right to incorporate them into our lives because we humans are the crown of creation. Speciesism is the attitude that humans have developed over centuries where we have the right to life over other species, the right to control other species. And this for animal rights scholars is a great example of the hegemony, of the dominance of humanity over other life forms.

Now you might have seen the range from individual to collective, so the question remains why study vulnerability? What is the point? We study vulnerability because we should examine the conditions under which certain people, certain as in humans and certain life forms have been made into or rendered into vulnerable people. That is, the contexts, remember what I said the social, economic and cultural context in which some people are rendered more vulnerable. You will recall and we will come to that in later lessons about the migrant workers problems during COVID-19, the problems of older people during the pandemic, the problems of those workers who are contractual employees during the pandemic etc. And in order to examine the structural conditions in which different kinds of vulnerability emerge whether it is economic or cultural, linguistic hate cultures or majoritarianism, global war, climate change and climate crisis which kinds of vulnerabilities emerge are exacerbated, amplified or diminished. And then, we need to understand the role of social institutions, remember what I said insurance, biomedical, the state, the corporate sector, the law-and-order mechanisms which enable or aggravate or diminish vulnerabilities as in where do we go when we are rendered vulnerable and how do we approach those organizations or institutions to gain relief from our vulnerability.

So the reason why we study vulnerability is all of these. So just as a quick recap, we move from an understanding of vulnerability as injurable bodies, we move through the contexts in which bodies, humans, persons, other life forms are rendered vulnerable, we go through institutions that enable vulnerability or diminish vulnerability such as insurance or medical services. We look at how shared vulnerabilities emerge just because we are members of a particular community or context and then we understand shared vulnerabilities as structural conditions where oppression, hatred are directed towards certain life forms, what I call speciesism after posthuman critics and certain communities which are endangered, oppressed because humanity's certain segments believe that these are disposable people. So, vulnerability is a wide range of conditions moving from ontological by virtue of our existence in a corporeal form to shared vulnerabilities. We will look at more aspects of vulnerability in later lessons. Thank you.