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Vulnerability

A Critical Tool for Conviviality-Inequality Studies

Mariana Teixeira



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Mariana Teixeira

Abstract

The aim of this working paper is to foster the concept of “vulnerability” as a critical tool for social theory in general and conviviality-inequality studies in particular. First, to clarify the concept, an analytical distinction is established between vulnerability as either an experiential structure shared by all persons (constitutive vulnerability) or as historical social injustice that detrimentally impacts some more than others (contingent vulnerability). The paper then explores the contrast between approaches to epistemic injustice theory and standpoint epistemology as two opposing views with regard to the political and epistemic potential of vulnerability. From this contrast, finally, a critique of one-sided conceptions shows us that, for vulnerability to have a productive and critical use, it must be grasped as fraught with ambiguity, implying both a contingent risk of subjection and a constitutive opening to otherness. It is this ambiguity that makes vulnerability a useful conceptual tool for grasping conviviality as inextricably connected to inequality.

Keywords: vulnerability | epistemic injustice | standpoint epistemology

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1. Introduction

The use of *vulnerability* as a key conceptual tool for social theory has been on the rise in recent times. Estelle Ferrarese calls this novel theoretical tendency a “vulnerable turn”, noting that “[s]ociological, ethical, geographical, philosophical, and economic reflection on human, animal and environmental vulnerability, and indeed on the vulnerability of life forms, has blossomed spectacularly over the last fifteen years” (Ferrarese 2016a: 2). The concept appears in varied contexts and subfields of social theory, notably in studies about the precarious situation of marginalised groups like women, children, refugees, the poor, the elderly, and other (e.g., religious, racialised, differently-abled, or sexual) “minorities”, including ever-growing literature on the susceptibility of these groups in the face of natural hazards and the impacts of climate change (e.g., Blaikie et al. 2004). Beyond the academy, vulnerability is also a central category for the production of governmental and non-governmental reports on social inequalities and for the formulation of public policies meant to address them (e.g., IPCC 2014). Moreover, with the Covid-19 pandemic that started to hit the globe in 2020, the notion of vulnerability has been extremely relevant to understanding the present world, both in its similarities (as everyone is vulnerable to the virus) and contrasts (since some groups are more vulnerable than others to becoming infected and/or developing the disease’s more serious complications).

Despite being employed more widely today than ever before, the usefulness and centrality of the concept of vulnerability for critical social theory is still a matter of contention among researchers (Ferrarese 2016a: 2). Precisely because it is increasingly widespread, the meaning of the term is also up for debate: even those who agree that it is a central conceptual tool have divergent pictures of what kind of social phenomena it refers to. The polysemy of vulnerability also implies contrasting assessments about its status as either a conditional, comparative situation or a widespread human trait, as well as about the valency of its normative import, namely, whether it is something to be either avoided or valued.

This working paper intends to propose a specific understanding of vulnerability as a critical tool for social theory in general and conviviality-inequality studies in particular. Our first task will be to establish a broad analytical distinction between vulnerability as either *constitutive* or *contingent* – that is, as either an experiential structure shared by all human (or living) beings or a conditional state of affairs that impacts, in an unjust and detrimental manner, some more than others.

The paper then explores the contrast between Miranda Fricker’s theory of epistemic injustice, on the one hand, and Dorothy Smith’s feminist standpoint epistemology, on the other, as two opposing views with regard to the political and epistemic potential of

vulnerability. Whereas the former approach sees vulnerability mainly as epistemically and politically debilitating, the latter takes the unique position of the vulnerable as a potential source of knowledge and action, thus leading to diverging positions regarding the normative status of vulnerability.

Such contrast allows, finally, for a critique of one-sided representations of how vulnerability is experienced by peripheral subjects. We argue that the political and epistemic dimensions inherent in the experiences of those at the margins of society who share a perceived sense of vulnerability must be grasped without either condescension or romanticising but rather as a situation fraught with tensions and ambiguities, implying both a contingent risk of subjection and a constitutive opening to otherness. Thus conceived, the concept of vulnerability can be productively instrumentalised to refine and complexify the theoretical analyses of social relations of living together where openness and submission co-constitute one another.

2. Contingent Vulnerability

As it is usually employed by sociologists and policymakers, the meaning of the concept of vulnerability is close to the daily use of the word as one's increased susceptibility to a harmful event. Along with related terms,¹ it has been broadly employed in the social sciences in the last decades to designate the precarious situation of certain social groups with regard to the possibility of experiencing detrimental occurrences. The threat of descent into poverty and hunger, exposure to exploitation, violence or death, or a lesser capacity to cope with health hazards, natural disasters or armed conflicts are but a few examples. In this sense, vulnerability has been conceived as a comparative concept used to indicate which social groups are at a greater risk of being affected by different kinds of harms.

The unequal distribution of risks between social groups can have varying intensities. Let us consider the following examples of gender inequality: women are more likely than their male counterparts to be employed in undervalued jobs and to earn less for the same work; data on domestic violence show that women are at a far greater risk than men of being assaulted and murdered by their spouses, and the physical and potentially life-threatening consequences of the (often illegal and hence unsafe) termination of pregnancies fall in all cases to women's lot. Both the severity of the threatened harm (from economic disadvantage to physical death) and the degree of disparity in the gendered distribution of risks (as the terms "more likely", "at a far greater risk", and "in all cases" indicate) vary in each described situation.

¹ For example, "risk" (Beck 1992 [1986]; Luhmann 1993 [1991]) and "precariousness" or "precariat" (Castel 2003 [1995]; Standing 2014).

In any case, such disparity in risk is typically seen as an *injustice* to be corrected – mostly by way of public policies or private initiatives aimed at alleviating the effects of the harms suffered by vulnerable groups – for instance, by promoting equal pay, quotas, and professional education for women, setting up shelters for victims/survivors of domestic violence, and providing safe and free abortion services.

Vulnerability is conceived here thus as the susceptibility to harm; but as it is distributed among society's members in a (sometimes extremely) unequal way, systematically leaving some rather than others at the mercy of deleterious events, this greater susceptibility to being harmed is itself already a kind of (second-order) harm. To the extent that this increased susceptibility is knowingly experienced by the vulnerable, it becomes even greater harm, one that is *systemic* in the sense proposed by Iris Young regarding violence:

The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimisation, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy (Young 2012: 62).

Thus construed, the concept of vulnerability allows us to grasp social injustices that are effectively in play and have harmful consequences even when the threat they represent is not fully concretised. This is well exemplified when we contrast the concepts of “hunger” and “food insecurity”: the latter refers to a phenomenon whereby social groups might not experience the lack of access to enough food intake on a regular basis, but they do experience the permanent threat of not having such access, and this leads to their subjection to rather intricate harmful situations that remain obscure in the conventional, narrower understanding of hunger. Another example is women's vulnerability to rape: whereas some women will experience rape (as a first-order harm) in their lifetimes, virtually all women experience (as a second-order harm) the harmful effects of being constantly exposed to this threat, including having to continually adopt costly and burdensome protective measures.

In addition, a proclaimed benefit of the framework of vulnerability with respect to other tools to conceptualise social injustices is its character as an eminently processual category, which allows it to grasp historically changing realities while providing a less essentialised depiction of the subjects affected. The perilous situation some groups find themselves in is thereby more clearly associated with a complex entanglement of social relations rather than with some inherent feature or natural predisposition. Thus

understood, the notion of vulnerability also points to the permanent changeability of societal circumstances, allowing room for a horizon of social transformation.²

This view of vulnerability as harm is the most recurrent in the social sciences and can be termed *contingent vulnerability*. As a social injustice to be corrected, it requires responses against the exacerbated, unjustifiable risks affecting specific social groups. Such responses are mostly construed as institutional (governmental or non-governmental) measures for either offering protection for vulnerable populations or fostering resilience among them.

3. Constitutive Vulnerability

In contrast to the approach to vulnerability as harm, i.e., as detrimental to those affected and therefore something to be avoided or at least alleviated, a more positive view of the term has been recently gaining traction, for instance within the fields of feminism, care ethics and critical theory (e.g., Bergoffen 2003; Cavarero 2009 [2007]; Ferrarese 2016a, 2016b; Gilligan 1993; Gilson 2011, 2014; Mackenzie et al. 2014; Petherbridge 2016). This approach builds on a criticism of the liberal notion of the sovereign, self-sufficient individual whose aim is to become impenetrable or resilient to external threats. It also intends to avoid the often paternalistic leanings of the conventional understanding of vulnerability which posits vulnerable subjects as in need of help or protection: state- or otherwise sponsored, but mostly externally sourced. If seen uniquely as harm, the notion of vulnerability – its manifest conceptual advantages notwithstanding – would thus tend to rob marginalised social groups of their agency and thereby victimise them once again (cf. Bankoff 2001).

Setting off instead from an eminently intersubjective notion of subjectivity formation and affirming the interdependence inherent to all social life, this alternative approach sees the exposure to being affected by others as a potentiality rather than necessarily a weakness. As a shared feature of human subjects in the face of natural realities (the finitude of life and the certainty of death, the fragility of the human body, the restrictions imposed by ageing and disease) and historical events (stemming from the unpredictable, conflict-laden character of social encounters), vulnerability is thus conceived as an integral trait of our way of being in the world – and indeed a crucial one for the possibility of human sociability and the production of meaning. A condition shared by all, not just one group or another, vulnerability in this sense is not only

² Ferrarese stresses that “Castel’s preference for the terms precarity and vulnerability, instead of poverty or marginality” is meant “to suggest that one is in the present of processes rather than of states, and perhaps also, to endow oneself, thanks to that dynamic perspective, with better tools for intervening lest the instability of situations congeals into destiny” (Ferrarese 2016a: 21).

unavoidable but indeed valuable. This shared receptivity is a *constitutive* form of vulnerability.

To be sure, proponents of this approach to vulnerability maintain that no one's vulnerability should be abused (Miller 2002; Murphy 2012; Petherbridge 2016). They do not deny that the permanent threat of abuse pervades the lives of a great parcel of the members of society; they also acknowledge that such threat occurs in structural patterns that tend to penalise some groups in favour of others. The unequal distribution of risks is seen as a social *injustice* here as well, but the specificity of this viewpoint is that its opposite, i.e., social *justice*, does not amount to simply eliminating vulnerability; it depends, rather, on the achievement of equal conditions for all to experiment with their own vulnerability in an open, non-violent interaction with others. The aim is hence to replace the abuse of vulnerability not with its suppression (e.g. through external protection or internal resilience) but rather with the mutual experimentation of vulnerabilities.

Hence, whereas the first approach to vulnerability equates it with a contingent risk of subjection to another, the second takes it as a constitutive opening to otherness.³ They must not, however, be mutually exclusive: contingent vulnerability is also often understood as resulting from the socially produced abuse of one's constitutive vulnerability, affecting some groups but not others. Everyone shares the frailty of the human body in the face of a vigorous storm, for instance (a constitutive vulnerability), but to recognise that the urban areas more prone to deadly landslides are inhabited by the poor (a contingent vulnerability) illuminates the relational inequalities among social classes. The potential agent of the harm in both cases is the same: a storm; but while one case refers to all human beings regardless of the social relations between them, the other focuses primarily on said relations.

From this general characterisation, it is now possible to draw a clearer picture of what is at stake when we inquire into the political-epistemic advantages and disadvantages vulnerable subjects might encounter. As seen earlier, a broad literature has persuasively argued that being susceptible to events in the world and to the actions of others is not a harm *per se* – indeed, as an opening to otherness, constitutive vulnerability is a condition of possibility of both knowledge and action. The point here, however, is to

³ See, in a similar vein, Judith Butler's distinction between "precariousness" and "precarity" (Butler 2009), Erinn Gilson's contrast between "ontological" and "situational" vulnerability (Gilson 2014), or the tripartition of "inherent", "situational", and "pathogenic" vulnerability present in Mackenzie et al. 2014.

explore a question that seems even more counterintuitive: can contingent vulnerability also reveal some kind of potency in the affected subjects?⁴

The focus here is thus on the political-epistemic dimensions not of constitutive vulnerability as a fundamental trait shared by all persons but of contingent vulnerability as the precarious situation of certain social groups in comparison to others, which systematically renders them particularly susceptible to a variety of harms. From now on, “vulnerability” will refer to this relational sense of the term – albeit informed by the decisive caveat, drawn from the constitutive approach, against the risks of conventional proposals for fighting contingent vulnerability solely with internal (individualistic) resilience or external (patronising) protection.

The political-epistemic advantages and disadvantages of the perspective of the vulnerable will be addressed in an indirect manner by way of a conceptual contrast between Miranda Fricker’s approach to epistemic injustice and Dorothy Smith’s feminist standpoint epistemology. To be sure, neither author confers centrality to the term “vulnerability”, but they do refer systematically to the phenomenon we are calling “contingent vulnerability” as a cornerstone of their theoretical approaches.

4. Vulnerability and the Theory of Epistemic Injustice

In her seminal book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker discusses a form of social injustice that is specifically epistemic: harms that affect someone in their capacity as a knower and as a conveyer of knowledge (Fricker 2007). Epistemic injustice theories in the wake of Fricker’s book try to spell out the many ways the knowledge of the vulnerable about their own situation is systematically invalidated in the public sphere or, on a prior level, rendered inarticulable to begin with. She distinguishes two kinds of epistemic injustice: hermeneutical injustice occurs when certain lacunae in collective interpretive resources prevent social actors from making sense of and articulately expressing their own social experiences; on a subsequent level, testimonial injustice occurs when speakers, given that they have managed to grasp their problematic social experiences and linguistically articulate them in the form of testimonial narratives, are systematically discredited, their accounts being almost automatically put into question by the hearer. Fricker intends, thereby, to further an ethical and political turn in the way philosophy reflects about epistemic relations and practices, highlighting the connections between social power and knowledge production

4 In her critical appraisal of what I am calling the framework of constitutive vulnerability, Alyson Cole argues that “[i]t would require a feat of contorted logic to cast the experience of victimization in itself as productive” (Cole 2016: 271). The point here, however, is to investigate vulnerability not in itself, but rather in its impelling force as an unsettling lived experience.

and recognising that “social disadvantage can produce unjust epistemic disadvantage” (Fricker 2007: 2).

Particularly interesting for our purposes is the case of hermeneutical injustice. The imbalance in the “economy of hermeneutical resources” (Fricker 2007: 1) is directly connected with how unequal power relations tend to distort the shared interpretive tools socially available, which will turn out to be structurally prejudiced because “unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups” (Fricker 2007: 154–155). Those who are hermeneutically marginalised “in virtue of their membership of a socially powerless group” (Fricker 2007: 155) are also “more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible” (Fricker 2007: 148).

In order to illustrate the case of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker recounts, referring to a memoir of the US women’s liberation movement by Susan Brownmiller, how the notion of “sexual harassment” was coined to name an experience shared by many women in silence (Brownmiller 1990). In this case, the injustice lies not in the hearer’s unfair distrust in the speaker’s account of a given experience (like the testimonial injustice present when women are not believed after reporting being raped) but rather in a lack of social understanding that unfairly affects the speaker so as to render her ill-equipped to grasp her own experience. For Fricker, the lack of proper understanding of women’s experience of sexual harassment in cultures prior to this critical concept means that “harasser and harassee alike are cognitively handicapped by the hermeneutical lacuna – neither has a proper understanding of how he is treating her” (Fricker 2007: 151). However, says Fricker: “the harasser’s cognitive disablement is not a significant disadvantage to him. Indeed, there is an obvious sense in which it suits his purpose” (Fricker 2007: 151). This “cognitive disablement” is highly disadvantageous, on the other hand, for the harassee, because she is prevented from properly making sense of a patch of her own experience which “is strongly in her interests to understand, for without that understanding she is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment” (Fricker 2007: 151).

Fricker hence proposes to foster the epistemic virtues of the “responsible hearer”, which could lead subjects to correct for the sorts of negative prejudicial biases that underpin testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. The *virtue of testimonial justice*, for instance, lies in detecting and correcting the influence of identity prejudice on the hearer’s credibility judgement, which involves a stance of critical openness to the word of others (Fricker 2007: 66). In the face of *hermeneutical injustice*, in turn, the virtuous hearer would have to exercise a reflexive critical sensitivity, this time to detect (and to the possible extent to correct) “any reduced intelligibility incurred by the speaker owing to a gap in collective hermeneutical resources” (Fricker 2007: 7). The

hermeneutically just hearer will, then, achieve a judgement regarding the credibility of a speaker that is struggling to convey an articulate account only after considering that the speaker's lack of intelligibility might not be the speaker's fault but due instead to collective hermeneutical limitations. Fricker thinks "this possibility of a subject's unprejudiced perception of another human being winning out against his prejudiced beliefs is crucially important for our understanding of how social change is possible" (Fricker 2007: 41) and goes so far as to claim that "the collective exercise of the virtue could ultimately lead to the eradication of hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker 2007: 174).

One notes that Fricker's approach to overcoming epistemic injustice focuses primarily on the expected virtues of the just hearer, not on the lived experience of the vulnerable speaker, that is: on a well-intended observer rather than the wronged participant. It seems hence predisposed to bring to light above all the debilitating effects of injustice, while the epistemic potentials of vulnerable social positions are largely overlooked. In this regard, a vicious cycle arises that seems unable to explain, let alone foster, struggles for social and epistemic justice: social injustice leads the affected to experience an epistemic impairment which leads to a heightened degree of social injustice, which leads in turn to a deeper epistemic impairment, and so on.

For Fricker, therefore, emancipation from epistemic injustice seems to depend almost exclusively on the goodwill of either "neutral" observers or (which is even less likely) agents that actually benefit from the injustice at hand. Thus, using Fricker's example of the coining of the term "sexual harassment", one would expect an external observer (or the harasser himself!) to exert their epistemic virtues and correct for the epistemic injustice suffered by a somewhat helpless, cognitively impaired harassee. In her own account, however, Fricker acknowledges that the notion of sexual harassment filled a hermeneutical lacuna by the initiative not of observers or authorities of any kind, nor of the harassers, but rather of the women who were subject to harassment. This poses a problem for authors working with the notion of epistemic injustice that do not seem to consider the possibility that vulnerability can be enabling in any way: by focusing exclusively on the many harms produced by the entwinement between epistemic and social forms of injustice, one ends up with an aporetic approach whereby one mutually reinforces the other.

5. Vulnerability and Feminist Standpoint Epistemology

A diametrically opposed stance in this regard can be found in feminist standpoint theories. This approach emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of socialist feminists inspired by Georg Lukács's theory of the standpoint of the proletariat as able to reach the perspective of the totality of capitalist society. The somewhat counterintuitive

argument of authors like Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Sandra Harding is that women have (or might achieve) a privileged epistemic perspective regarding the unjust social relations that render them vulnerable.

With “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology”, Dorothy Smith is one of the first authors to have written on feminist standpoint epistemology. She argues in her influential 1974 essay that social theory was established in a male-dominated world and has hence systematically neglected the experiences of women, leading to what we could characterise as a pervasive epistemic injustice. To correct for this neglect, however, it would not suffice to simply supplement existing sociological theories with studies about topics related to women’s practices that were previously overlooked. This “merely extends the authority of the existing sociological procedures and makes of a women’s sociology an addendum” (Smith 1974: 7), obscuring the tension between the worlds of men and women.

Since this tension entails not only a separation but also an authority of one pole (men’s) over the other (women’s), women learn to discard their lived experience “as a source of reliable information or suggestions about the character of the world” (Smith 1974: 8). For Smith, what is needed instead is a social theory that takes the everyday experience of women as its epistemic starting point: the unavoidable situatedness of social theory should be taken as an integral part of its methodological and theoretical strategies since the subject’s lived experience allows for the social character of everyday experiences not only to become observable but also to appear as problematic – as something to be conceptually inquired into. Women are in a particularly apt position because they are, in Smith’s words, “native speakers” of their situation (Smith 1974: 13), a situation in which social contradictions make themselves felt with great acuteness. Therefore, “[t]hough such a sociology would not be exclusively for or done by women it does begin from the analysis and critique originating in their situation” (Smith 1974: 13).

Hence, like Lukács, who examined the proletariat’s experience as internally split between subject and object (Lukács 1979 [1923]),⁵ Smith regards contradiction as the very requirement to being able to see certain aspects of reality as demanding theoretical explanation through an inquiry into the social-economic structure of the world beyond the immediate, dominant perspective. The contradiction at the heart of women’s experience would provide thus the motivational potential for an emancipatory standpoint to be theoretically and politically achieved.⁶ For Smith, and feminist standpoint theorists more generally, women’s continued exposure to potentially harmful

5 For a comparative analysis between Lukács’ approach and feminist standpoint epistemology, specifically the proposals of Dorothy Smith and Nancy Hartsock, cf. Teixeira 2020.

6 It is important to stress that standpoint theorists generally consider that the knowledge available to the oppressed group must be struggled for. It represents not a given, but rather an achievement which requires both theoretical and political activity (e.g., Hartsock 1983).

circumstances tends to generate in them an emancipatory interest⁷ that manifests itself epistemically and politically in the impulse toward understanding and overcoming their experienced situation; in other words: toward knowledge and change.

Thus conceived, feminist standpoint epistemology can be, and often has been, extrapolated to other socially dominated or vulnerable groups, which are then seen as being in a potentially advantaged position to grasp the relations of domination within unequal societies. This idea is well captured by Fredric Jameson in his understanding of the standpoint theory project as a whole:

The presupposition is that, owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and to know, features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups (Jameson 1988: 65).

In a nutshell: a certain standpoint – or certain standpoints – might enjoy epistemic and political advantages *because*, and not *although*, they are the standpoints of those at the margins of society.

6. Conclusion: The Ambiguities of Vulnerability

The foregoing analysis suggests that the standpoint epistemology approach might be better equipped to deal with the forces of resistance that drive social emancipatory change than the theory of epistemic injustice sketched earlier. The motivational potential identified by Smith in the standpoint of the vulnerable is a crucial aspect that seems to be missing from Fricker's account of how to overcome epistemic injustice. It is noteworthy, in this sense, that in Fricker's own portrayal of the coining of the term "sexual harassment", based on Brownmiller's account, it was the victims/survivors of the social injustice – and neither its perpetrators nor neutral observers – who came up with ways of filling the hermeneutical lacuna that had until then rendered their experience inarticulable.⁸ Standpoint epistemologies such as Smith's, in turn, have the virtue of not underestimating the motivational potential for epistemic insight and political action that is latent in the experience of being vulnerable to injustices of some kind.

7 On the notion of emancipatory cognitive (or epistemic) interest, cf. Habermas 1987 [1968] and Honneth 2017.

8 Note that the notion of vulnerability spelled out earlier allows us to understand all women in patriarchal societies as subject to the risk of sexual harassment, which is a (second-order) injustice in itself and has very concrete harmful consequences, even if not all women have been directly subject to the (first-order) violence of sexual harassment.

Standpoint epistemologies, nonetheless, are to some extent subject to the opposed shortcoming: they tend to overestimate the political-epistemic potential of vulnerability, and thus pay insufficient attention to the various reasons why the apathy (and even complicity) of the vulnerable is such a widespread phenomenon. This optimistic view makes standpoint epistemologies prone to romanticising vulnerability and neglecting the real, concrete risks it presents to the affected subjects. In so doing, moreover, they are also likely to overburden vulnerable groups as the sole agents of social transformation, whereas those who benefit from their marginalisation seem to be relieved of all accountability in the path toward justice and emancipation.

In sum, then, both Fricker's epistemic injustice approach and Smith's feminist standpoint epistemology reject the often alleged neutrality of knowledge production and a clear-cut separation between science, ethics, and power, but they do so in ways that lead them in opposing directions. When it comes to addressing the political-epistemic dimension of struggles against domination, epistemic injustice approaches focus on the impairments undergone by the vulnerable, while standpoint epistemologies stress their potentially privileged standing. As they tend to emphasise to some degree unilaterally either the negative or the positive potentials of the standpoint of vulnerable subjects, the complex ambiguities⁹ of their lived experience risk being overlooked: vulnerability is thought of as either predominantly impairing or enabling in political-epistemic terms.

On the one hand, thus, it is important to go beyond the explanation offered by the epistemic injustice approach discussed above, for it tends to reinforce a paternalistic connection between vulnerability and passivity, lack of agency, and even cognitive impairment caused by social injustices. This does not seem to hold once confronted with the history of social movements, here exemplified in women's protests against the normalisation of, and generalised social assent to, sexual harassment. On the other hand, however, women have historically been both protagonists in the mobilisation against gender discrimination as well as part of the support base of misogynist practices and structures – and this holds true for other vulnerable groups as well. This reveals the limits of an empowering view of contingent vulnerability and presents a real challenge for any kind of standpoint epistemology, inviting the questions: Why do so many members of vulnerable groups either passively or actively, but systematically, support the very regimes that threaten to abuse their vulnerability? Why do they often remain oblivious to the workings of such abusive regimes?

⁹ Like Gilson (Gilson 2014: 78), I take the term "ambiguity" from Simone de Beauvoir's essay on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir 1976 [1947]). In this context, it does not carry the negative overtone present, for instance, in Cole 2016, designating instead the unsettling but dynamic interaction of opposites that drives our quest for meaning. I explore Beauvoir's view of ambiguity as opposed to the Lukácsian notion of dilaceration in Teixeira 2022 (forthcoming).

While the coexistence, in the same subjects, of vulnerability to and complicity in injustice does pose a dilemma that confronts standpoint epistemologies, one must nonetheless look for an explanation beyond the patronising assumption that vulnerability *per se* impairs one's ability to grasp and stand up to the suffered or threatened injustices. Complicity or submission might be traced back instead to strategies of resistance and survival, for instance. These comprise not only open confrontation, but also subtler forms of (not necessarily conscious) negotiation and compromise that often appear as sheer passivity and compliance. Critical social theories thus need a perceptive attentiveness to grasp the epistemic and political ambiguities of social injustices, so as to avoid the twin dangers of romanticisation and condescension with regard to the standpoint of the marginalised.

Our proposal is that the concept of vulnerability can be a valuable resource in this regard to the extent that, as suggested earlier, its contingent and constitutive dimensions are not understood as unmediated opposites. The difference between contingent and constitutive vulnerability proposed here lies not in one being socially produced and the other a natural given. To the contrary, both are eminently social – and thereby historically engendered – realities. Contingent forms of vulnerability differ from constitutive ones instead because they are distributed in a structurally uneven manner across society and thus establish a hierarchy between social groups, which is widely experienced as an injustice. When we take the group-specific susceptibility to harms and the universally shared receptivity to otherness as different but internally related phenomena, the dyad loses its either/or character; as a result, neither can be regarded as purely negative or positive, impairing or enabling. Hence, marginalised groups have in their vulnerable situation a heightened responsiveness and a potential entry point to certain phenomena. Thus construed, vulnerability allows us to account for the fact that marginalised subjects are neither merely passive and powerless victims in need of rescue or enlightenment nor automatically rebellious agents with nearly infallible insight into social injustices. One can thus also begin to grasp how privileged subjects might be able to understand and even relate to the experience of contingently vulnerable groups: sharing in the constitutive vulnerability of human life, they have at least the basic set of tools necessary to reckon with forms of vulnerability that affect others as group-specific social injustices.

As an eminently processual category, moreover, vulnerability discloses a possible horizon of social transformation as well as the dangers involved in its pursuit. Being vulnerable means that one is at risk of being harmed – and whereas this vulnerability is already a kind of (second-order) harm in itself, it also points to the possibility of escaping the first-order harm of which vulnerability is a threat. The situation described

by the notion of vulnerability thus implies an opening to both fear *and* hope, complicity *and* resistance.

How they intermingle in contexts of living together with power inequalities and which of them becomes the prevailing drive at a particular moment (and, accordingly, whether the approach of epistemic injustice or a standpoint epistemology will better describe a particular case) are questions that cannot be settled a priori, in theory alone. They depend on concrete circumstances resulting from the interplay between social structures and historical events and contingencies. In this sense, critical social theories, including conviviality-inequality studies, will benefit from analytical tools that carry a meaningful, compelling descriptive force and, at the same time, the ability to take into account the fundamental openness of human experiences. The concept of vulnerability can play this demanding role, it seems – but only insofar as it is not reduced to either passivity or potency alone, but is regarded rather as both a *contingent risk of subjection* and a *constitutive opening* to otherness.

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