

# All Vulnerable

About: Marie Garrau, *Politique de la vulnérabilité*, CNRS  
Éditions

by Cécile Lavergne

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**Can we think of social transformation from the perspective of vulnerability? Yes, explains Marie Garrau, but for this we need to define the meaning of this notion differently, and to describe all the forms of inequality that weaken us and subject us to multiple forms of violence in our societies.**

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Vulnerability as a category of sociological analysis and a philosophical concept has recently been the subject of intense publishing interest.<sup>1</sup> Within this now flourishing literature, Marie Garrau develops a strong and original paradigm of *the politics of vulnerability*, and pursues the double aim of rethinking the concept of autonomy and of sketching a theory of social justice. The author's theoretical gesture, which consists in defending the centrality of vulnerability, offers critical avenues for the renewal of contemporary political philosophy.

## Should We Be Afraid of Vulnerability?

If we must shed our fears of vulnerability, it is first and foremost because we live in a world structured around the “myth of autonomy,”<sup>2</sup> an autonomy conceived as the prerogative

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<sup>1</sup> To mention only a few recent works, see for example: Michel Naepels, *Dans la détresse, une anthropologie de la vulnérabilité*, Paris, Editions EHESS, 2019; Estelle Ferrarese, *La fragilité du souci des autres*, Lyon, ENS Editions, 2018; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London and New York, Verso, 2009; Guillaume Le Blanc, *Que faire de notre vulnérabilité?*, Montrouge, Bayard, 2011; V. Châtel and Sh. Roy (eds), *Penser la vulnérabilité : Visages de la fragilisation du social*, Québec, Presses universitaires du Québec, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993.

of the rational subject, master of his life, his destiny, and bearer of a freedom that must not be impeded in any way. Because this founding myth has traversed the history of political liberalism, Garrau takes a position diametrically opposed to Rawlsian theory from the outset, and turns to philosophers attentive to the anthropology of vulnerability (mainly Martha Nussbaum, Joan Tronto, and Axel Honneth<sup>3</sup>).

Yet the task is far from easy, as vulnerability is subject to a form of generalized dissemination, in the field of public policies on the one hand,<sup>4</sup> and in the academic field on the other. Such virality casts doubt on the descriptive and analytical scope of the term by exposing it to the criticism that it suffers from terminological vagueness. In addition to this epistemological reproach, the notion is criticized on a more strictly political level: It is accused of producing stigmatizing effects on the social groups it is intended to designate, of legitimizing paternalistic, even miserabilistic policies, and of creating a new economy of power.<sup>5</sup> Despite these pitfalls, Garrau defends, via a clarification effort, the theoretical centrality of vulnerability with a view to promoting “for all the conditions of autonomy conceived as relational and expressive” (p. 251).

## **Fundamental Vulnerability and Problematic Vulnerability**

The central idea of the book is that if we are to “loosen the grip of stigma, which attaches itself to those who do not demonstrate the independence, assertiveness, or determination commonly associated with autonomy” (p. 339), we must rethink politics from the perspective of a commonly shared vulnerability.

To establish this thesis, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between fundamental vulnerability and problematic vulnerabilities: “Taking vulnerability seriously implies [...] considering vulnerability under two aspects: (a) as a structure of common existence—here we speak of “fundamental vulnerability”; (b) the intensity of which may grow unequally in some contexts as a result of specific social processes—in which case we speak of “problematic vulnerability” (pp. 19-20). The first sense refers to our common incarnate condition, which imposes openness to the possibility of injury, mourning, illness, but also to the dependency

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986; Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993; Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995; Axel Honneth, “Decentered Autonomy: The Subject After the Fall,” in Charles W. Wright (ed.) *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> <https://laviedesidees.fr/Le-concept-de-vulnerabilite.html>

<sup>5</sup> H el ene Thomas, *Les vuln erables. La d emocratie contre les pauvres*, Editions du Croquant, Broissieux, 2009.

that is essential to the relations sustaining our lives (relations of recognition, care). The second sense brings to light the socially produced intensification of fundamental vulnerability that follows from the logic of disaffiliation, stigmatization, social disqualification, and intersectional oppression.

One of the major contributions of this book, then, is to rethink the concept of autonomy. Fundamental vulnerability is not the negation or the reverse of a supposedly original autonomy; rather, it is that from which autonomy must collectively form itself, and even perform itself: This autonomy, which is dependent on the relation to the other, to the world, to the community, to institutions, to “nature,” is permanently put at stake. In Garrau’s view, it must be conceived as expressive and relational. First, it is expressive in that it refers to the capacity to express *what we hold dear*. It relies on subjective dispositions to self-confidence, on the exercise and deployment of reason, but also on imagination as the ability to project and reinvent new possibilities of existence. Second, it is relational because it can only be achieved if the subject is forever involved in relations of care, respect, and mutual recognition—as shown by the works of Martha Nussbaum, Joan Tronto, and Axel Honneth.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Garrau brings to light the ethical implications of vulnerability. While autonomy depends on a set of interpersonal relations, it also imposes on us a series of mutual obligations. However, to stick to a simple ethical posture would entail a form of renunciation: Denials of recognition and experiences of injustice would then be considered merely as individual moral failings, when in fact they are socially and institutionally conditioned. The diagnosis that social mechanisms intensify fundamental vulnerability thus appears as a necessary condition for analysis: For some individuals and social groups, material precariousness, emotional isolation, unemployment, stigmatization, and symbolic and social violence are all obstacles to the construction of autonomy. The latter’s description, which the author draws in particular from the sociology of Robert Castel and Serge Paugam,<sup>7</sup> cannot be limited to the interpersonal or interactional scale, but must be linked to an analysis of the social institutions, norms, and structures conditioning the social contexts that produce denials of care and recognition—as attested, for example, by the general trend towards the fragmentation and individualization of social protections, which prevents a large number of individuals from accessing stable employment and social citizenship, and which has joint social disqualification and status degradation effects (p. 188, p. 200).

Lastly, if the ethics of vulnerability is to have a political future, it must also address all the socially accepted representations that support, justify, and contribute to reproducing the unequal distribution of problematic vulnerabilities. The theory of domination, inspired in particular by materialist feminism,<sup>8</sup> must contribute to subverting the logic of indifference to

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<sup>6</sup> “For fundamentally vulnerable subjects to gain autonomy [...], they must be subject to different forms of recognition: care, respect, and esteem. » (p. 340).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017; Serge Paugam, *Le lien social*, Paris, Puf, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique de pouvoir. L’idée de Nature*, Paris, Côté Femmes, 1992.

the vulnerability of others, as well as the structural effects that can hinder resistance and social transformation. Indeed, the stereotypes that discipline bodies and practices are largely part of an economy of power that can render obsolete the prospects for rebuilding social justice.

## Which Politics of Vulnerability?

While Garrau is concerned with rethinking social justice around the centrality of vulnerability, the latter cannot be reduced to a redistribution of “equal basic rights and primary goods” (p. 317), lest it reenact stigmatizing effects on vulnerable groups. Avoiding this pitfall entails considering the contents of emancipation that are expressed in experiences of contempt, but also in experiences of contestation and revolt. This is why, on the terrain of institutional theory, the politics of vulnerability must think together the conditions of inclusive democracy and those of contestatory democracy. The republican tradition,<sup>9</sup> which draws its strength from “the political ideal it defends [that allows] to justify the fight against social processes of vulnerabilization and the promotion of relational and social conditions for autonomy” (p. 231), offers precisely a coherent theoretical framework for formalizing the politics of vulnerability based on three elements: the conception of democracy, social policies, and, finally, republican virtues, which is to say, the interpersonal conditions that make it possible to ground an ethics of recognition.

The idea of contestatory democracy, borrowed from Philip Pettit, entails that the people can amend laws, and, therefore, that demands for care, respect, and esteem, which are driven by social conflicts, must be able to influence both their definition and the determination of public policies. As Iseult Honohan<sup>10</sup> argues, this requires linking contestation to participation so that each minority has an audible voice in the democratic public space and can take part in collective deliberations.

However, this definition of inclusive democracy is the necessary but not sufficient condition for a genuine politics of vulnerability. In a second sense, it must address material and symbolic inequalities. Thus, Garrau draws on the work of Stuart White<sup>11</sup> in order to conceive a form of welfare state capable of “neutralizing, correcting, or compensating all arbitrary inequalities from a moral point of view” (p. 319). To this end, she discusses concrete proposals like the introduction of a civic minimum, the offer of start-up capital, or the taxation of inheritances and interpersonal gifts. Finally, on the grounds that laws and public policies must be mediated by individual behaviors, i.e., that there is an intimate

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart White, *The Civic Minimum: On the Rights and Obligation of Economic Citizenship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

complementarity between ethics and politics of vulnerability, Garrau defends, *in fine*, the theory of republican virtue<sup>12</sup>: “Common ends cannot be achieved and institutions cannot last if citizens do not implement specific dispositions and virtues” (p. 329). According to the author, it is on this condition that citizens can become sensitive to interdependence and to common vulnerability.

*Becoming collectively sensitive to fundamental vulnerability and to problematic vulnerabilities.* This tacit watchword of the book nevertheless comes up against the weight of social, political, and imaginary resistances that obstruct the deconstruction of the myth of autonomy and lie at the very heart of our language-games—a deconstruction without which the politics of vulnerability risks being confined to a set of ineffective and stigmatizing institutional mechanisms. As Wendy Brown observes when she questions “the making of contemporary political desire,”<sup>13</sup> the whole difficulty of this program lies in the emotional dynamics of “*resentment*, revenge, and a thwarted will to power,”<sup>14</sup> which reinforce political powerlessness by falsely diffracting causes onto the most vulnerable. How can we prevent the politics of vulnerability from being coopted by “authoritarian liberalism”<sup>15</sup> and integrated into its practical repertoire for the containment of social conflict—the “society of the unruly”<sup>16</sup>? Although this goes beyond the project of the book, knowing how to arm the politics of vulnerability against the crises currently obscuring the horizons of emancipation—the crisis of capitalism, the environmental crisis—would allow us to extend the analysis towards a critique of contemporary violence, but also towards a consideration of the relations of care and recognition that are also built with the human and non-human beings, environments and contexts on which we are interdependent.

Despite these grey areas, the position defended in this book, far from slipping into “the unfortunate formulations of an identity rooted in injury,” involves restoring strong and rich meaning to politics as commons building and as emancipation.

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<sup>12</sup> The author draws on the analyses of Cécile Laborde (*Critical Republicanism, op. cit.*), who defends the importance of republican virtues like civic vigilance, the courage to speak out, attention to others, and moral humility.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. xii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Grégoire Chamayou, *La société ingouvernable. Une généalogie du libéralisme autoritaire*, La Fabrique, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

