
CALL FOR PAPERS

A Workshop on Vulnerability and Social Justice

June 17-18, 2016

Moot Court, The Liberty Building, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

The terms “vulnerability” and “social justice” have been used with increasing frequency in recent years. Both are often invoked in alternative, sometimes incompatible ways. In this workshop we are interested in exploring what these terms mean, individually and in relation to each other, in everyday, political, and professional usage, as well as their potential as “terms of art” for furthering substantive progressive change.

The Vulnerability and Human Condition Initiative (VHC) uses the concept of vulnerability to challenge the dominant conception of the universal legal subject as an autonomous, independent and fully-functioning adult. Rather than building our systems of law and justice upon this static figment of the liberal imagination, the VHC approach argues for a socially and materially dynamic vulnerable legal subject, based on a richer account of how actual peoples’ lives are shaped by an inherent and constant state of vulnerability across the life-course. Vulnerability in this approach is a universalizing concept that focuses on relationships, institutions, needs, and shared or collective responsibility. It asserts there should be political and legal implications for the fact that we live within a fragile materiality that renders us constantly susceptible to change, both positive and negative, in our bodily and our social circumstances. Such vulnerability may be realized in the form of dependency on others for care, cooperation, or assistance or it may manifest through our dependency on social arrangements, such as the family or the market and economy.

The Centre for Law & Social Justice (L&SJ) explores the role that law has in addressing inequalities and achieving a more just society. L&SJ provides a home for researchers who come from very different intellectual and theoretical traditions, and whose substantive foci cover the spectrum of contemporary concerns. Yet all members share in recognizing the importance of securing access to a range of rights and resources as a baseline for respecting human dignity. Through a number of different theoretical frameworks - including vulnerability theory, the capabilities approach, human rights, embodiment theory, and Marxist and feminist approaches –L&SJ explores various articulations of standards, needs, and our expectations of both state and non-state actors.

Nevertheless, social justice is a term susceptible to different emphases and meanings, both within and between jurisdictions. Some commentators have pointed out that there may be a tension between the pursuit of social justice and neoliberal tendencies to hold individual freedom or liberty as paramount; others see the development of individual well-being and flourishing as necessary for collective advancement and as such compatible with a focus on freedom and liberty. However, the pursuit of social justice may mean it is sometimes necessary to put collective objectives ahead of individual interests and desires. While such tensions can be overcome, the contemporary emphasis on individual rights and freedoms – particularly in the US - can and have been adopted to undercut arguments for state regulation and intervention. Further, the turn to austerity has weakened commitments to social justice even in welfare orientated states. This workshop aims to explore the relationship between vulnerability and social justice, and the role of the responsive state in promoting both individual and institutional resilience.

Issues For Discussion May Include:

- What is the *social* in social justice?
- What is the relationship between vulnerability theory and social justice?
- To what can we attribute the increasing circulation of the terms ‘vulnerability’, ‘resilience’ and ‘social justice’ in recent years? What strategies does this language offer to address contemporary concerns?
- Are there distinctive contributions that vulnerability theory can make to projects designed to bring about positive and progressive social change?
- If we conceive of vulnerability theory as a means of understanding social justice, how does this effect how we understand and articulate resilience?
- If public and private societal institutions are essential for building individual and societal resilience, what mechanisms can we develop to ensure that institutions act in a way that is socially just?
- What conversations should we provoke between vulnerability theory and other 'new corporeal humanisms' such as the capabilities approach, precariousness, and social flesh?
- How should we approach the tendency in some professions and policy circles to identify groups or individuals as more or less 'vulnerable' and to conceptually segregate them into discrete 'vulnerable populations'?
- To what extent can disabilities studies and disability law recuperate this particular (mis-)use of vulnerability in policy fields and engage with the idea of universal vulnerability?
- How can the concepts of vulnerability, resilience, and social justice be effectively mobilized in politics? Are there terms that might be more effective?
- How might a foregrounding of the ‘vulnerable legal subject,’ rather than our present ‘liberal legal subject,’ provoke different claims for justice and distribution?
- How has the meaning and use of the term social justice changed over time?
- What is the relationship between social justice claims and justice claims arising from discrimination against certain individuals based on their minority status or other differences?
- What is the relationship between human rights and social justice?

The workshop is being convened by:

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Vulnerability and Resilience Background Reading at:

<http://web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability>

Submissions Procedure:

Email a proposal of several paragraphs as a Word or PDF document by March 1, 2016 to Rachel Ezrol, rezrol@emory.edu and Antony Butcher a.j.c.butcher@leeds.ac.uk

Decisions will be made by March 25, 2016 and working paper drafts will be due May 20, 2015 so they can be duplicated and distributed prior to the Workshop.

Workshop Details:

The Workshop begins Friday at 4PM at Leeds University. Dinner follows Friday’s session. Panels continue on Saturday from 9 AM to 5 PM; breakfast and lunch will be provided.