

VULNERABILITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

DON KULICK

Fall Term 2018

Fridays 10-12 pm

Vulnerability and human rights are intimately intertwined. Human rights advocates argue that rights must be extended to vulnerable populations, but what does vulnerability actually signify and entail? The idea of vulnerability is currently undergoing re-evaluation in philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities. From having been perceived as a condition from which subjects should be defended, rescued or liberated, vulnerability and passivity have increasingly come to be theorized as a position and experience that confronts us with the limits of understanding, empathy, ethics and theory. This course will discuss work that attempts to engage with vulnerability as a challenge that can guide us towards new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Active class participation and presentations. Throughout the course, you will be asked at various points to prepare introductions to the literature. The point of these introductions, which must last no longer than 5 minutes, is to quickly summarize the material and open the discussion to topics that you feel merit attention. These presentations will form part of your final grade.
2. A total of four critical/reaction papers posted on the course site. You may choose whichever four weeks you like. The papers should be about one page in length, at 16 pt. line spacing, Times New Roman font. They may deal with any questions the readings raise for you, such as queries or criticisms you have of the authors' method or argument; connections to other readings; disparities among the readings; implications of the readings for important issues in anthropology or ethnography, and the like.

A guiding rule of engagement in this class is: be generous. The authors we are reading are not stupid, and they have probably considered at some length most of the questions or objections you may raise. With that in mind, engage with the texts in the spirit of dialogue and generosity, not opposition and attack. I put tremendous stock in exegesis and will stress this throughout the class, because in order to engage critically with a text, you need to have really understood what it says. So make sure that you work out the various authors' arguments clearly before you engage in any kind of critique.

To facilitate discussion, the papers must be posted by noon on the Thursday before the material is to be discussed in class. Everyone should take 30 minutes before class to read through the papers that have been posted there. These papers will not be graded but they obviously should make it evident that you have read the relevant literature.

3. A final paper that uses the literature to discuss the relationship between vulnerability and human rights. The paper should primarily be exegetical and must range over a number of the arguments developed by scholars whose works we read during the course.

This paper is due by Friday 2 November at noon. Put a hard copy of the paper in my mailbox in the Anthropology Department, and email me the paper as an attachment to don.kulick@antro.uu.se.

Length: no more than 10 pages, excluding title page and bibliography (Times New Roman 12 pt. font, double spaced, 1 inch margins on all sides). Do not use footnotes. Do not forget to number the pages.

REQUIRED BOOKS

You are expected to buy the following books and you must read them thoroughly before class.

Agamben, Giorgio 1998. *Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford Univ. Press.

Coetzee, J.M. 1999. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press.

Derrida, Jacques 2008. *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. Fordham University Press (or read the article version, in *Critical Inquiry*)

Foucault, Michel 1978. *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1*. Any edition.

Kipnis, Laura 2017. *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. Harper.

Kulick, Don & Jens Rydström 2015. *Loneliness and its Opposite: sex, disability and ethical engagement*. Duke University Press.

Nussbaum, Martha 2007. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Harvard University Press.

Tuner, Bryan S. 2006. *Vulnerability and Human Rights*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Book chapters will be provided, you should find the articles online.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Session 1. Introduction, 7 September

Tuner, Bryan S. 2006. *Vulnerability and Human Rights*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Foucault, Michel 1978. *The history of sexuality, Vol. 1*. Any edition.

Young, Iris Marion 1997. "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought." *Constellations* 3 (3): 340-63.

Note: you are expected to have read both these books and the article before the first class. Be ready to summarize and discuss them.

Session 2. Nussbaum on the capabilities approach, 21 September

Nussbaum, Martha 2007. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Harvard University Press.

Session 3. Animals, vulnerability and human rights, 28 September

Berger, John 2007 (1972). Why look at animals? In *The Animals Reader*, edited by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald. Bloomsbury Academic.

Descartes, Rene 2007. From letters of 1646 and 1649. In *The Animals Reader*, edited by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald. Bloomsbury Academic.

Heidegger, Martin 1995. *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics: world, finitude, solitude*. Indiana University Press, read pages 193-212.

Derrida, Jacques 2002. The animal that therefore I am (more to follow). *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2): 369-418. NOTE: this long article has also been published as a book by Fordham University Press. Read the text in either format. Read everything, but skip pages 404-415 in the article. Check with me regarding the corresponding pages in the book.

– 2003. And say the animal responded? In *Zoontologies: the question of the animal*, edited by Cary Wolfe. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 121-46, and included in *The Animal that therefore I am* volume.

– 1991. ‘Eating well’, or the calculation of the subject: an interview with Jacques Derrida. In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy. London: Routledge, 96-119; Read only pages 111-18.

Coetzee, J.M. 1999. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton University Press. Read pages 1-69 and Barbara Smut’s commentary, pages 107-120.

Session 4. Ethical engagement, 5 October

Kulick, Don & Jens Rydström 2016. *Loneliness and its Opposite: sex, disability and ethical engagement*. Duke University Press.

Kulick, Don 2015. The problem of speaking for the other *redux*: insistence on disclosure and the ethics of engagement. *Knowledge Cultures* 3 (6): 7-27.

Session 5. Recent theorizing about vulnerability, 12 October

Butler, Judith 2016 [2009]. *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* Verso. Read the introduction, “Precious life, grievable life”, 1-32.

– 2016. Rethinking vulnerability and resistance. In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambeiiit and Leticia Sabsay. Duke, pp. 12-27.

Fineman, M.A. The vulnerable subject and the responsive state”, *Emory Law Journal* 60(2): 251-275.

Agamben, Giorgio 1998. *Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford Univ. Press.

Session 6. Currents of vulnerability, 16 October (OBS, this is a Tuesday)

In August 2018, the *New York Times* broke the story that Avital Ronell, 66, prominent feminist academic who has worked at New York University for many years, had been suspended from work without pay for a year because the university found her guilty of sexually harassing a 34-year-old male graduate student. The case raises multiple issues because, among other things, a letter defending Ronell, apparently written by Judith Butler and signed by luminaries such as Slavoj Žižek, Gayatri Spivak and Joan Scott, defended Ronell and threatened NYU with repercussions should her employment be terminated; also, Ronell is lesbian and her accuser, Nimrod Reitman, is a gay man.

This case involves many different strands of vulnerability, all of which are tied up with issues of power, gender, sexuality, race, justice, politics, social networks, and so on.

You will be divided into groups, and together with your group, you will read whatever you can find about the case and prepare a critical analysis of it to present in class. Each presentation must be ten minutes long (no longer, it will be timed and stopped at the ten minute mark).

Below is a selection of material that has so far emerged about the case, more or less in chronological order. Start here and follow the case as it develops. Read the Kipnis book in order to provide historical background about sexual harassment on college campuses in the US, as well as a related case-study.

Read anything else you consider relevant and incorporate it into your presentation.

The point of this exercise is not to act as judge and pass judgement on anyone involved. The point is to use the tools you have acquired to think intelligently about the case, and discuss the different dimensions of vulnerability that the case raises.

Selected literature:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/nyregion/sexual-harassment-nyu-female-professor.html>

<http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2018/06/blaming-the-victim-is-apparently-ok-when-the-accused-is-a-feminist-literary-theorist.html>

<https://www.thecut.com/2018/08/avital-ronell-professor-accused-of-harassment-what-to-know.html>

<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/judith-butler-explains-letter-in-support-of-avital-ronell/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/an-nyu-sexual-harassment-case-has-spurred-a-necessary-conversation-about-metoo>

<https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2018/08/18/the-full-catastrophe/>

<https://medium.com/@amyelizabethrobinson/on-power-and-aporia-in-the-academy-a-response-in-three-parts-f7387c346ffa>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/24/metoo-victim-asia-argento-jimmy-bennett>

Kipnis, Laura 2017. *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. Harper.

ATTENDANCE

Attendance is obligatory. You are allowed one unexcused absence, which must be made up by submitting a 5-page paper that summarizes the literature read during the week of the absence. This paper must be turned in, in class, the week following the absence. Two absences during the term will result in an automatic fail grade.

INCOMPLETE

You cannot receive an Incomplete in this class.

POLICY ON LATE ASSIGNMENTS

No late papers will be accepted.

USE OF COMPUTERS AND CELL PHONES IN CLASS

Please turn off and put away all cell phones and computers during class.

tone of critique in class

READ THIS QUOTE FROM JOHN RAWLS AND KEEP IT IN MIND WHEN ENGAGING WITH THE LITERATURE

I always assumed...that the writers we were studying were always much smarter than I was...If I saw a mistake in their arguments, I supposed they saw it too and must have dealt with it, but where? So I looked for their way out, not mine. Sometimes their way out was historical: in their day the question need not be raised; or wouldn't arise or be fruitfully discussed. Or there was a part of the text I had overlooked, or hadn't read.