

## **DISABLING THE SUBJECT: FROM RADICAL VULNERABILITY TO VULNERABLE RADICALS**

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In 2010 the psychologist and social worker Brene Brown gave a twenty minute TED talk titled 'The Power of Vulnerability' (Brown, 2010). It has proven very popular, being viewed over 28 million times at the time of writing (February 2017), and been subtitled in 52 different languages. That a concern with vulnerability to trauma and dealing with associated mental distress should be integral to professions such as psychology and social work should be no surprise. However, it is not only within the professions that the concept of vulnerability proliferates. Today, many political claims use the language of vulnerability, with campaign groups, including trade unions, increasingly justifying their case on the basis of the vulnerability of the particular individuals or groups they claim to represent, whether that is in demands for, inter alia, more resources, sympathetic immigration hearing or protection from physical and/or mental harm (McLaughlin, 2012). The twenty-first century has also seen the expansion of legal definitions of a 'vulnerable adult', meaning that more people can be so classified than would have been the case in previous years (Brown, 2015). In addition, new forms of state surveillance have been put in place to protect the growing numbers of 'the vulnerable', for example in the exponential increase in the number of people subject to criminal records checks for jobs, whether paid or voluntary, that in the past would not have required them (Appleton, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

For some, the concept of vulnerability can be harnessed for progressive social and political purposes, becoming a platform for collective forms of action from which social justice can be achieved. Vulnerability, from this perspective, offers the opportunity for a reconceptualization of human relations in general (e.g. Brown 2010), and for specific groups such as the physically disabled or people with learning disabilities in particular (e.g. Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016). Others have highlighted problems with the way the discourse of vulnerability operates within modern society, seeing the operation of the vulnerability discourse as paving the way to state paternalism (Furedi, 2004), reducing socio-political problems to psychoemotional ones (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002; Frawley, 2015) and representing a process of political stagnation and decline of a belief in wider social change (McLaughlin, 2012). The concept has also been critiqued in relation to particular areas such as education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008) and specific groups such as young people (Brown, 2015), disabled people (Oliver, 1990) and people with learning difficulties (Hollomotz, 2009). Vulnerability, then, has become a key component of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> My main focus is on developments within the United Kingdom although similar developments are occurring in many Western countries in particular the United States of America.

sociological and political discourse, leading Brown (2015) to argue that we are living within a 'vulnerability zeitgeist'.

In this paper I discuss the concept of vulnerability in relation to the implications of its operation within certain socio-political discourses. In order to do this I first chart the rise of vulnerability in contemporary society by focusing on its expansion within the legal and welfare system and how it has been conceptualised within social theory. Second, I wish to highlight two, separate, but related developments within academia that combine political activism within a discourse of vulnerability; that of critical disability studies that highlights universal vulnerability as a radical, progressive social goal, and student demands for the university to be a 'safe space' free from emotional hurt and misrecognition. My aim in linking these two areas is to show that such developments are not confined to a rather niche aspect of social and political theorising, but rather have expanded to influence wider socio-political discourse and political activism. The political implications of this incorporation of a vulnerability ethos within political circles are then discussed. The conclusion emphasises the way in which notions of internalised vulnerability pose dangers for the political process.

### **The Rise of the Vulnerable**

The utilisation of the concept of vulnerability is ubiquitous within UK social services and disciplinary systems of assessment for, and provision of, services, for example in the allocation/prioritisation of social housing, the protection of children, young people and many adults, and also plays a part within the criminal justice system. Such ubiquity can give the impression of a natural, ahistoric concept rather than a relatively recent framework for understanding both individual problems and social relations. Whilst not a new term it is one that has expanded in recent years to encompass ever more people within its reach. This can be demonstrated by a brief consideration of changing definitions within the legal field.

In 1995, the Law Commission proposed the following definition of a 'vulnerable person':

a "vulnerable person" should mean any person of 16 or over who (1) is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental or other disability, age or illness and who (2) is or may be unable to take care of himself or herself, or unable to protect himself or herself against *significant* harm or *serious* exploitation.  
(Law Commission, 1995, p.159, my emphasis)

Of significance is that vulnerability is not automatically assumed to flow from the specific categories mentioned in section one; the criteria in section two must also be met. In addition, even being at risk of harm or exploitation is not sufficient for the label of vulnerable to be applied, the harm must be significant, the exploitation serious. This definition was adapted by the Lord Chancellor's Department in 1997 with 'vulnerable person' being replaced by 'vulnerable adult', and the word 'serious' was dropped to have a similar threshold for harm and exploitation, both being required to be 'significant'. It is still widely used within local authorities' informational literature whether in hard copy or online.

In 2000, the policy guidance document *No Secrets*, whilst keeping the 1997 definition, elaborated on what constituted 'community care services' 'to include all care services in any setting or context' (DH, 2000, para.2.4). The same year saw the introduction of the Care Standards Act 2000 which expanded the definition to a quite considerable extent. A 'vulnerable adult' no longer needed to belong to a specific service user category, nor did he or she need to be at risk of any form of harm or exploitation, never mind of a significant degree. Simply to use a social or health service could see you join the ranks of the officially 'vulnerable'. The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, expanded the definition even further, defining health care as receiving 'treatment, therapy or palliative care of *any* description' (s.59[5]), my emphasis), whilst any provision of assistance by virtue of age, health or any disability also renders the recipient amongst the ranks of the vulnerable (s.59[5]). There have been some attempts to replace the label 'vulnerable adult' with 'person at risk' but these have been largely ignored (Hollomotz, 2011).

Whilst disabled theorists and activists would point out that we all require assistance as we go through daily life, with the disabled just requiring different forms or levels of assistance (e.g. Oliver, 1990), it is difficult to ignore the fact that this legislation in effect equates disability with vulnerability. Also of interest is the way the Act equated being in 'lawful custody' or a 'detained immigrant' with being a vulnerable adult, which amounts to a sort of therapeutic exposition of criminology and a psychological reorientation of immigration policy that, at least in part, depoliticises it. Vulnerability then is linked to normative assumptions of deviance, deficit and deservingness (Emmel, 2017).

The expansion of the legal definition may mean that more people can be classified as vulnerable but this does not necessarily relate to receiving additional welfare provision. In similar vein to the utilisation of the Lord Chancellor's definition by local authorities, rather stricter criteria apply before being eligible for such support. In order to be assessed as eligible for social care services you need to show that:

1. Your needs arise from (or are related to) a physical or mental impairment or illness, *and* 2. The issues you face have a *significant* impact on your wellbeing, *and* 3. You are unable to achieve two or more of the following activities: Eating and drinking; Maintaining personal hygiene; Managing toilet needs; Being appropriately clothed; Being able to make use of your home safely; Maintaining a habitable home environment; Developing or maintaining family or other personal relationships; Accessing and engaging in work, training, education or volunteering; Making use of necessary facilities or services in the local community including public transport and recreational facilities or services; Carrying out caring responsibilities the adult has for a child.

(MCC, no date, online, my emphasis)

That access to services still requires a relatively high threshold to be met indicates that the wider expansion of the term is a cultural phenomenon only tangentially related to the provision of social support services. For example, if there is a relatively specific, if wide-ranging, definition within the legislature, this is not the case within social policy and organisational circles where there are frequently problems with how vulnerability is

defined. In a detailed analysis of the academic literature, Brown identifies five different, if overlapping, uses of the concept of vulnerability:

‘natural’ or ‘innate’ vulnerability, determined by physical and/or personal factors that are often associated with certain points of the lifecourse such as childhood and old age; ‘situational’ vulnerability, referring to biographical circumstances. Situational difficulties or transgressions – this can include the input of a third party or structural force, and can also involve human agency (often to a contested extent); vulnerability as related to social disadvantage, the environment and/or geographical spaces; universal vulnerability, where vulnerability is seen as a state shared by all citizens, but which is socially or politically constituted to varying extents; and vulnerability as a concept closely related to risk.

(p.28)

She perceptively notes how ‘the term seems to be used less in its relational sense (where someone is vulnerable to something specific, such as illness or violence) and more as a stand-alone term’ (Brown, 2015, p.3).

Vulnerability, in the wider cultural sense, speaks to a sense of insecurity, alienation and powerlessness. In addition to these aspects of the debate I would add another, that of vulnerability as a signifier of the contemporary human subject, an identity rather than a social relation. In effect, it has become a noun.

### **From innate vulnerability to radical vulnerability**

The idea of innate vulnerability applies to everyone but tends to refer to specific parts of the lifecourse such as childhood and older age, or in relation to certain people throughout the lifecourse due to physical and/or mental impairment. Such perspectives have been subject to much criticism, for example in relation to children it has been pointed out that the concept of, and attitudes to, childhood varies historically and culturally, there being no universal notion of a ‘child’ (Burman, 2016). Many disabled writers also question the dominant view that they are innately vulnerable, arguing that in locating vulnerability as within the individual the role of society in the construction of disabled people’s vulnerability is downplayed or ignored (e.g. Oliver and Sapey, 2006).

In articulating a social model of disability the *Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS) made a crucial distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’. The former is viewed as being ‘the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment’, the latter as being ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation, which takes little or no account of people who have impairments, and thus excludes them from many mainstream social activities’ (UPIAS, 1976, pp.3-4). From this perspective, disability is ‘the loss or limitation of opportunities to participate in normal community life on an equal basis with non-disabled citizens’ (ibid.). In other words, disability is the result of an impairment meeting a non-hospitable society.

In attempting to change societal perceptions of disability, a key area of intervention has been over terminology, language being seen as not merely reflecting reality but as actively constructing and perpetuating existing social relations (Parker, 2007). For example, Oliver and Barnes (1998) assert that ‘the use of the phrase “people with disabilities” is unacceptable because it blurs the crucial distinction between impairment and disability’ (p. 18). They prefer the term ‘disabled people’ as this sits more closely with the social model of disability which views disability as arising due to the way society is organised in such a way as to exclude disabled people. Similarly, in terms of intellectual impairment, many prefer the term ‘learning difficulties’ over that of ‘learning disability’, the former term implying that people are able to learn once difficulties in the learning process are overcome, although it should be acknowledged that many would prefer not to be labelled at all (Goodley, 2000). When words are seen as holding such power, it should be little surprise that battles over what is acceptable and unacceptable public discourse have grown in recent years and have become a key battleground, not only within academic theorising but political activism also. I will return to this later in relation to demands for ‘safe spaces’ and calls to curtail speech.

A belief in the innate vulnerability of certain people or groups can also lead to a patronising, protective attitude towards them that can undermine their rights and deny them agency. Such a discourse acts to single out and ‘other’ certain groups in ways that can be controlling, stigmatising and oppressive (Brown, 2015). For example, in relation to people with learning difficulties, Hollomotz (2009) argues that the concept of vulnerability can be too simplistic in accounting for the diverse processes involved in the formation of sexual violence, and therefore we need to go beyond vulnerability in order to conceptualise the dynamics behind sexual violence and learning difficulties. She notes how the label ‘vulnerable’ can override a person’s wishes as procedures dictate process rather than either the person’s wishes or a worker’s judgement, giving the example of a woman with learning disabilities who confided to a support worker that she had been sexually assaulted some months previously. Despite the woman insisting she did not wish it to be followed up on, because she was labelled a ‘vulnerable adult’ this wish was overridden and the police and social services got involved, a process she found made her revisit something she had wished to put behind her (Hollomotz, 2011). In addition, many people with learning difficulties find their ability to choose even the more mundane aspects of daily life curtailed on account of their ‘vulnerability’.

In contrast to a deviance/deficit model of vulnerability, some scholars in the fields of law and family welfare (e.g. Fineman, 2010; Emmel, 2017) propose a more relational account that contrasts ‘universal vulnerability’ and ‘particular vulnerabilities’. The former refers to experiences ‘pertaining to the body that may affect us all at different times across the life-course’ (Emmel, 2017, p.2) whilst the latter is rooted in, ‘the interruption or destruction of social relationships’ (Fineman, 2010, p.268). However, whereas Fineman’s theoretical approach tends to see autonomy and vulnerability as oppositional terms, Emmel instead proposes a different approach that ‘treats autonomy as an intrinsic property of vulnerability’ (p.2). Such a perspective seeks to ‘account for an individual’s agency and how this might be exercised within legal and social structures’ (ibid.).

In recognition of this, many disabled theorists and activists choose not to challenge the presumption of vulnerability, but rather to embrace it and seek to expand the category by emphasising that vulnerability is an inevitable part of the human condition (e.g. Oliver and Sapey, 2006; Fineman, 2010). In doing so, the intention is to highlight the ways in which we are all vulnerable, some more so than others, some for longer than others, but nevertheless, vulnerability is a human universal. In addition, it is pointed out that to cope with life we all require the help and support of others, whether that is in the form of such things as social organisation, emotional connection or healthcare. From this perspective, acknowledging, embracing, celebrating even, our common vulnerability can play a part in fostering a more tolerant and inclusive society, as well as a more socially just welfare state as a counter to the current neo-liberal one. For such writers the aim is to

‘depathologise official categories by recasting vulnerability as a progressive attribute of a relational citizenship, integral to the “fragile and contingent nature of personhood” where we are all “potentially vulnerable” and where vulnerability is a “universal” ontological dimension of human experience and identity’.

(Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016, p.177)

Such an approach, it is hoped, will allow people to be protected from any detrimental effects of potential vulnerabilities and also from pathologising and intrusive state-sponsored interventions, whilst simultaneously allowing those with current actual vulnerabilities to be supported according to their specific situation and associated needs.

From these perspectives, collective and specific vulnerabilities are presented as a potential source of political mobilisation, for example by highlighting the suffering caused by contemporary social, economic and political relations. Vulnerability is here utilised for anti-capitalist and social reformist purposes. Butler links notions of vulnerability to that of *precarity* as a vehicle to combat oppression: ‘precariousness [is] a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed [is] one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life’ (quoted in Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016, p.178). In a similar vein to standpoint theory, where the oppressed are said to have a better understanding of the reality of social conditions than the rulers, precarity and vulnerability can awaken us to the problems of the age.

As I argue next, the focus on, and reconceptualization of, vulnerability, is not only seen as central to the pursuit of social justice, for some it entails a radical reappraisal of what it means to be human, and a need for newer ‘post-human’ understandings of the human Subject (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016; Liddiard, 2016).

### **Disabling the human, enabling the post-human**

The Subject of humanism has come under sustained attack from many radical circles, to such an extent that we have a rather ‘ticklish’ subject (Zizek, 1999,) one with a heightened sense of personal vulnerability amid a crisis of meaning in relation to what it means to be human (Delsol, 2003). As we shall see this critique of humanism has influenced the

trajectory of not only contemporary theory but political activism also, contributing to demands for the protection of the vulnerable and emotionally fragile self.

Humanist thought with its emphasis on rationality, autonomy and competence is said to 'other' those subjects who for whatever reason fail to live up to this ideal. Influenced by poststructuralism, humanism's critics seek to destabilise binaries and fixed notions of what it means to be human. The idea of the human subject, a key component of liberal thought since the Enlightenment, is not only contested but stands accused of propagating oppressive social relations both at home and across the globe. Within poststructuralist thought, the Subject (with a capital S) is a burden of which we would be better relieved, as in actuality, such a Subject is invariably 'man-white-western-male-adult-reasonable-heterosexual-living in towns-speaking a standard language' (quoted in Goodley, 2007, p.154).

Those who fail to meet this vision of the human are then classed as 'other', as less human, or non-human. Within the field of critical disability studies biopedagogies are said to 'serve to produce the archetypal (masculine, cisgender, white, non-disabled, middle class, straight) citizen and autonomous human subject under neoliberal capitalism. Those considered other to this limited conceptualisation of humanity are positioned to fail' (Rice, et al., 2016, p.6). In other words, some of us are more human than others, and there are some who are excluded from the category altogether.<sup>2</sup>

For some, such as Goodley, this is inevitable as the humanist subject defines himself by what he excludes.<sup>3</sup> Taking an affirmative approach to vulnerability,

shifts us away from a humanist reliance on the independent sovereign self to a post-human celebration of interdependence. The vulnerable self depends upon others to live. Numerous disabled selves that are normatively understood as dependent are now recast as sources of interdependence. Disability, we might suggest, demands interdependency, thus inviting new ways of thinking about what it means to be a (post) human subject.

(Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016, p.180).

In much post-humanist thinking, Deleuze's concept of the *rhizome* is used against the 'arborescent' way of thinking and viewing individuals and their lived experiences. People are rhizomatic, not arborescent, not singular growing to a relative height that places them in a hierarchical position to some and subservient position to others. Rhizomes shift, appear everywhere, are interconnected, it is impossible to find a

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<sup>2</sup> Rice's additional categories to those mentioned by Weiss seventeen years earlier may note a changing focus of political expression but it also highlights what has been called 'the endless etcetera of difference' where another aspect of identity can be forever added (Heartfield, 2002). Any hope of collective identification is continually fragmented; we can end up with as many identities as we have people, individualism via radical deconstruction.

<sup>3</sup> The desire to be all inclusive is exemplified in the realm of lesbian and gay rights. The LG was soon extended to include bisexual people to give us the LGB acronym, soon after transpeople were added to make LGBT, with this being gradually extended to give us the more inclusive but tortured acronym LBGTQQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex and Asexual).

beginning or an end, it is always in the middle, not being but becoming, interbeing, intermezzo (Goodley, 2007). The emphasis is on the rhizome as alliance, always connected rather than the filial nature of the tree. The tree asks us 'to be' but the rhizome carries within it the conjunction 'and...and...and [which] carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be"' (quoted in Goodley, 2007, p.149). The rhizome is not localised, it is always in between. People then are not fixed, static, points; they are always in a process of becoming. In employing Deleuzian concepts, Goodley (2007) suggests that they can 'contribute to the development of disability studies as they 'refute the static formation of human subjects; challenge the fixed boundaries between disabled and non-disabled bodies; deconstruct the certain bodies of medicine and individualization; [and] promote the interconnected nature of human becomings' (p.157).

Humanism, from this perspective, devalues difference, something said to be inevitable because 'Humanism can only spawn and value those kinds of humans that match its prototype' (Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016, p.180). Such a critique lies, in part, on the correct observation that the abstract notions of universality, reason and equality associated with humanism do not fit with a pluralistic and inegalitarian world. For Horkheimer (1941), reason degenerated 'because it was the ideological projection of a false universality' (p.36).<sup>4</sup> For some, such as Levi-Strauss, the roots of the Nazi Holocaust were to be found in Enlightenment humanism:

All the tragedies we have lived through, first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally the concentration camps, all this has taken shape not in opposition to or in contradiction with so-called humanism in the form in which we have been practising it for several centuries, but I would say almost as its natural continuation.

(quoted in Malik, 1996, p. 241)

However, to indict Enlightenment ideals of universalism, reason and progress as leading to the horrors of the twentieth-century, and other forms of social oppression, is to proffer a rather one-sided and ahistorical reading. Arguably it was not the ideals, but rather the degradation of the ideals that led to the aforementioned barbarism. It was not reason itself that was the problem but that 'the last traces of reflectiveness and of a will of one's own, which human beings can possess are reduced to nothing by the social (political) institution' (Castoriadis, 1997, p.168).

Jacoby (1999) accuses postmodern/poststructural writers of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Noting how Enlightenment ideals are criticised as being camouflage for the powerful, he accuses its critics of going too far. For him,

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that an anti-universalist outlook was once a conservative trait. The French philosopher Joseph D'Maistre, writing in the wake of the French Revolution, said of the 1795 Constitution that it was 'made for man. But there is no such thing as man in the world. During my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on; thanks to Montesquieu, I even know that one can be Persian; but I must say, as for man, I have never come across him anywhere; if he exists, he is completely unknown to me.' [http://maistre.uni.cx/considerations\\_on\\_france.html](http://maistre.uni.cx/considerations_on_france.html)

the goal was to realize the ideals, however, not jettison them, as if injustice improves with cynicism. The notions of equality or universal love were not false in themselves; they were falsified by a reality that required changing.

(p.125)

In other words it was the corruption of the ideals within the existing socio-political environment, not the ideals themselves, that was the problem.

In conceptualising the dis/human, Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2016) use it in such a way as to 'recognise the norm, the pragmatic and political value of claiming the norm while always seeking to disrupt and contest it' (p.5). Or, as Liddiard (2016) puts, it 'the dis/human acknowledges a desire for the Human, at the same time as challenging its very narrow boundaries' (online).

This is a key point, and one that, to my mind, makes such writers more aligned to humanism than against it, despite their espoused antipathy towards it. The rational, autonomous subject is an ideal, it is an aspiration, a goal for humanity to be able to create a better society and to realise the human potential. Of course, this is easier said than done, and as many have pointed out there have been many atrocities done in the pursuit of human 'progress'. However, like the dis/human, humanists desire an improved Human, in terms of overcoming the barriers to the pursuit of a worthwhile life. It may always be tantalisingly outwith our grasp, but the more we reach out and expand our capacities the closer we will come to the ideal. However, as I show below, seeing progressive political capital in the embrace of vulnerability is to mistake a fact of life for the historically specific way such a concept is utilised within contemporary society.

### **From Radical Vulnerability to Vulnerable Radicals**

Analyses of vulnerability often acknowledge that like risk and fear it is primarily a subjective, not objective phenomenon. However, for Ahmed (2014), what is relatively unconsidered is the question of 'why some bodies are more afraid than others? How do feelings of vulnerability take shape?' (p.68). Ahmed notes that whilst fear may be experienced individually it is 'structural and mediated, rather than an immediate bodily response to an objective danger' (p.69), and hence such feelings of vulnerability 'shape women's bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit space' (ibid. p.70).

However, if feelings of vulnerability are structured and mediated, they are also historically specific in relation to how they are experienced, conceptualised and strategized, both in relation to how to improve both individual feelings and the social conditions from within which they arise. For example, the rise of 'work stress' was, to a large degree, a result of trade unions recasting problematic workplace relations in the language of individual vulnerability, the change in focus being due to the weakening of older more collective responses, such as industrial action, to such issues (Wainwright and Calnan, 2002). The rise of the 'survivor identity' in recent years has also been influenced by the changing nature of both individual and group demands for recognition of individual vulnerability rather than collective strength (McLaughlin, 2012).

From certain current radical standpoints, one strategy to counteract such feelings of vulnerability is to create 'safe spaces' to allow feelings, experiences and strategies for change to be expressed and developed. This approach has taken a foothold within universities in the UK and USA in recent years. Linked to the demand for safe spaces within universities is the growing cry for 'trigger warnings' to be placed on any course material that may contain potentially upsetting discussions (e.g. around rape or racism). In defence of both safe spaces and trigger warnings, Ahmed (2015) views them 'as a partial and necessarily inadequate measure to enable some people to stay in the room so that "difficult issues" can be discussed' (online). Likewise, 'safe spaces' are a way

to enable conversations about difficult issues to happen: so often those conversations do not happen because the difficulties people wish to talk about end up being re-enacted within spaces, which is how they are not talked about. For example, conversations about racism are very hard to have when white people become defensive about racism: those conversations end up being about those defences rather than about racism. We have safe spaces so we can talk about racism not so we can avoid talking about racism.

(ibid.)

From this perspective, safe spaces and trigger warnings are essential for increasing debate and dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

At face value this can be viewed as unproblematic. There is nothing wrong with a group of people meeting to discuss issues that they feel concern them in a more direct way than others; we must surely uphold the right to free association. Likewise, university campuses, like wider society, should be a place where people are not threatened with violence or intimidation.

However, the concept of the safe space is no longer confined to a specific area such as a classroom or meeting room where like-minded people could discuss issues in a semi-private forum, contemporary demands are often made on the basis that more and more aspects of university life should be a safe space. For example, the mere presence of speakers on campus with views some consider objectionable is now often considered to contravene the offended person's safe space.<sup>6</sup> Today's safe space must also be one in which people are kept safe from theoretical, political and religious views that upsets their sense of well-being, thereby making them feel vulnerable (Slater, 2016).

I would argue that it is not possible, or indeed desirable, for people to be protected from harmful ideas and opinions. The very nature of education will expose students to ideas and opinions that they find upsetting, with deeply held but unquestioned views being exposed to

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<sup>5</sup> It would be a mistake to see today's 'safe spaces' as equivalent to the Black and women's 'consciousness-raising' groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst there was often a therapeutic dimension to the latter groups, they were more concerned with understanding and strategizing against often blatant and serious instances of violence, discrimination and oppression.

<sup>6</sup> For an example of this see the disruption caused when Maryam Namazie was invited to speak at Goldsmith's University, with the protestors saying her presence and views violated their safe space. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1ZiZdz5nao>

opposing perspectives and ways of understanding and living in the world. That is the uncomfortable beauty of education, being taken out of your narrow, comfortable safe space and confronted by alternative ways of thinking about and being in the world.

Similarly, it is not unreasonable to allow students to feel free to express their views, feelings and experiences in a forum where they will not be subject to personal ridicule or abuse. Any good teacher or lecturer should be encouraging such an environment for their students. However, ridicule and attack should not be equated with challenge and disagreement, with the speaker being asked to elaborate on and defend such views. Once we move out of the classroom or private meeting, the exchange of ideas can be robust, passionate and likely to cause offence to someone, and from this there should be no safe space. Ridicule and attack are part of political and public debate, and you never know, you may come to see that it was deserved, leading you to change or modify your previously held beliefs. Unfortunately, recent years have seen the demand for safe spaces proliferate to the extent that public meetings have been cancelled, speakers whose views are deemed to be offensive and hurtful disinvited, and many activists refusing to share a platform with people they disagree with due to finding their views harmful and offensive (Fox, 2016; Slater, 2016). Here, similar notions of vulnerability and childlike innocence coalesce around what has been termed the 'snowflake student' (Fox, 2016).

### **The Power of Silence: Maintaining a 'safe space'**

The evidence would suggest that Ahmed's optimism that such measures as safe spaces and trigger warnings would help increase public discussion is misplaced. For example, an article in the *Washington Examiner* claims that two university professors were warned about discussing 'controversial' issues in class, in these cases transgenderism and homosexuality, following complaints from two students who found the content distressing. One of the complainants reportedly said, 'I would just like the professor to be educated about what trans is and how what he said is not okay because as someone who truly identifies as a transwomen [sic] I was very offended and hurt by this'. Both professors received a visit from the university's Orwellian-sounding Bias Response Team, with one professor advised 'not to revisit transgender issues in his classroom if possible to avoid the students' expressed concerns', whilst the other stated 'I do not believe that students should be required to listen to their own rights and personhood debated... [This professor] should remove these topics from the list of debate topics (Schow, 2016, online).

The prominent feminist Germaine Greer has been prevented from speaking at universities in the UK due to her 'misogynistic views towards trans women' (Melhuish, no date, online). Rachael Melhuish, women's officer at Cardiff University students' union, who set up a campaign on 'change.org' calling on the University to disinvite Greer, said that 'While debate in a University should be encouraged, hosting a speaker with such problematic and hateful views towards marginalised and *vulnerable groups* is dangerous (ibid. my emphasis). Following this ban, the veteran gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell found himself at the centre of a media storm after one student union officer refused to share a platform

with him in a university debate, due to him signing an open letter to a UK newspaper in support of free speech and against the banning of Germaine Greer (McVeigh, 2016).

There are many more examples from British universities. To cite just a few. Dapper Laughs, the comic creation of Daniel O'Reilly, had a performance scheduled for Cardiff University called off after a campaign by feminist students who claimed that his character violated the university's 'Anti-Lad Culture Policy' in that it dehumanised women by trivialising such things as rape and unprotected sex (McDermott, 2016). At Christ Church College, Oxford, university authorities cancelled a debate on abortion due to 'potential security and welfare issues'. This followed a campaign by some protestors and the Oxford University Students' Union Women's Campaign, who berated the debate's organisers for holding an event at which 'two cis-gender men debate what people with uteruses should be doing with their bodies' (ibid, p.22). In 2001, the University of Sheffield students' union banned the music of the rap star Eminem on the grounds that his 'homophobia and misogyny' spoiled the university's 'culture of tolerance, equality and respect' (quoted in O'Neill, 2016, p.10). This was not an isolated incident, with, more recently, the song Blurred Lines by Jason Thicke being banned by many universities' student unions due to its 'sexist' lyrics. *The Sun* newspaper and magazines such as *Loaded* have also fallen foul of student union censors. In addition to pop songs, some university student unions have also banned sombreros claiming that non-Mexicans wearing them is offensive to Mexicans. One US college has gone so far as to proscribe 'inappropriately directed laughter' (quoted in Slater, 2016a, p.2).

Whilst there was often a censorious element to early feminist campaigns, for example in calls to ban pornography (e.g. MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1985), there was also a desire to expand public debate by giving women a voice, to allow hitherto silenced groups to break the silence and have their experiences and contributions to society recognised. Today, however, we are more likely to hear calls to have voices silenced. Such is the power given to words that some words are deemed too dangerous to be heard.

Unsurprisingly, debates about the issue of free speech have proliferated in response to the increase in calls to censor speakers, demand for safe spaces and the search for means of reducing interpersonal offence. I am on the side of free speech, the academy, of all places, should be one where the free exchange of ideas can take place. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is not the validity of the claims that are the main concern, but rather the way they are justified on the basis that hearing offensive views is harmful to the psyche. In other words, the claims are made on the basis of the vulnerability of the claims-makers. Instead of radical vulnerability we have vulnerable radicals.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse of vulnerability within contemporary society can be a mechanism to allow some people to receive the support they require to enable them to achieve a higher level of social functioning and personal well-being. However, the radical embrace of vulnerability needs to be seen in historical context. In contrast to older political movements, this is

not an expression of a robust movement struggling against the forces of oppression, in a fight against the repressive force of the state. On the contrary, such radicals are more likely to view the state as a force to which calls for protection are to be made, institutional authority being called upon to offer protection from forms of harm that enhance the radical sense of vulnerability. Radical demands in the past were often about protections *from* the state, today they are more likely to be demands for protection *by* the state.

Calls for censorship and attacks on the academy's freedom to debate issues no matter how controversial or counter to the prevailing moral or political consensus are nothing new. What is new is that today's attacks on academic freedom are more likely to come 'not from outside the university, but from within, and not from the political right, but from the radical left. From the students' perspective, censorship went from being something to rail against to a morally righteous and politically radical act' (Williams, 2016, p.53).<sup>7</sup> What is striking is that the censorious students are not on their own even within the academy, on the contrary they are championed by many academics. Indeed, it is the latter who have paved the way for moral censure on campus by campaigning for speech and behaviour codes in an earlier era, demands that were made on the basis of the power of words to cause harm, and the dangers of informal, unregulated social interaction. So, whilst the sphere of student politics provides worrying examples of this trend and it is tempting to dismiss such examples as due to the follies of youth and inexperience, this would be to misunderstand the relationship between the tactics and beliefs of these students, their 'radical' predecessors and present day academics and activists. It would also be to miss the way such sentiments and restrictions on speech are becoming institutionalised not only within academia but the wider social and political sphere.

Civil society itself is reconfigured as a dangerous and hurtful environment of hostile and hurtful views and expressions and therefore needs to be reconfigured as a 'safe space' of sterile and ultimately conservative social interaction as speech, dress and expression are seen as in need of policing by the authorities. The concept of universal vulnerability, far from being radical, offers little challenge to existing power relations.

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<sup>7</sup> This change in outlook is understandable in light of the shift in understandings of subjectivity that occurred in the interim. The humanist paradigm saw human beings as capable of organising their own social relations without intervention from outside parties. The vulnerability paradigm demands protection from these outside parties.

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