

3 July 2015, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Convenors: Rita Brara, Ruhi Deol, Birgit Schneider

Participants and Presenters: John Barry (Queen’s University, Ireland), María Valeria Berros (National University of Littoral, Argentina), Rita Brara (University of Delhi, India), Virginia Garcia-Acosta Ciesas (Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, Mexico), Chris Conte (Utah State University, USA), Ruhi Deol (LMU Munich, Germany), Sophia Kalantzakos (New York University, Abu Dhabi Campus, UAE), Karandeep Mehra (University of Delhi, India), Daniel Münster (University of Heidelberg, Germany), Arif Hayat Nairang (University of Delhi, India), Birgit Schneider (University of Potsdam, Germany), Gordon Winder (LMU Munich, Germany), Philipp Zehmisch (LMU Munich, Germany)

This roundtable, held at the Rachel Carson Center on 3 July 2015, was intended to share multiple interpretations of the notion of vulnerabilities, in the wake of environmental and climate change from different empirically-rooted or theoretical standpoints. It brought together perspectives from academic work in the disciplines of sociology, law, geography, anthropology, political science, media studies, disaster risk, and environmental history. Most participants gave a ten-minute presentation on aspects of vulnerability within their work: here, we give a short outline of each of the presentations, followed by highlighting two main threads that emerged in defining and rethinking vulnerability.

In his talk on “Vulnerability, Green Political Theory and the ‘Human Condition’ in the Anthropocene,” **JOHN BARRY** showed how vulnerability is a concept prevalent in medical science, psychology and psychiatry, risk analysis, and ecology, but is rarely found in contemporary political theory. A diverse range of thinking about “dark” and “troubling” issues such as vulnerability, dependence, and related ideas such as contingency, suffering, pain, and death could paradoxically strengthen the fundamental life-enhancing and life-supporting objectives of green moral, political, and

economic thinking. Barry sought to establish the importance of vulnerability for understanding and responding to the current “human condition,” and to develop new or foreground underused conceptual tools for analysis and response to the conditions facing humanity in “the Anthropocene.”

KARANDEEP MEHRA looked at “Writing Vulnerabilities: Tracing Vulnerability in the IPCC 2014 Report” and attempted to trace the idea of vulnerability that emerges from the multiple vulnerabilities to climate change that have been recognized and mapped in the IPCC Working Group II Report 2014 titled “Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability.” The singular notion of vulnerability that emerges is guided by a conceptual schemata outlined within the report, whose *telos* is “invulnerability.” Vulnerability is traced to bring into view the political and moral implications of recognizing that which must first be realized.

In “Social Construction of Risks and Vulnerabilities,” **VIRGINIA GARCIA-ACOSTA CIESAS** discussed how natural phenomena and natural hazards are not synonymous. What has increased throughout time is not the presence of natural phenomena, but the presence of increasing risks and vulnerabilities—that is, the *social construction of risks*, a concept that refers to the forms in which society generates vulnerable contexts to such degree that the context itself becomes a hazard. The context consequently becomes a factor of risk generation that exceeds the acceptable consubstantial risk, and the forms in which society, in its interaction with the ecosystems, creates new hazards.

SOPHIA KALANTZAKOS asked about “The Rare Earth Crisis: A Case of Misinterpreted Vulnerability?,” using the concept of the rare earth crisis to highlight shifting vulnerabilities of countries and political systems. Rare earth elements are indispensable for a wide variety of high-tech applications, renewables, and green applications as well as the defense industry. In 2010, China, which had a near monopoly on these increasingly critical elements, imposed drastic quotas on exports, and prices soared due to an international incident. Though brief, this crisis raises concerns over resource scarcity, vulnerability, and resilience, the deployment of renewable energy applications, geostrategic concerns linked to a rising China, a possible outbreak of trade wars, and defense preparedness, to name a few. What can government, industry, and finance learn from the rare earth crisis today and for the future?

ARIF HAYAT NAIRANG, in a presentation on “‘Difficult’ Pollutant: Uncertain Ontology and Constituting Vulnerabilities,” explored the ontology and “becomings” of the “pollutant” and the vulnerabilities that are evoked with respect to its “uncertain ontology.” Nairang questioned the

singularity attributed to the pollutant through the multiplicities, transformations, and absences that are generated in its movements inside and outside the court of law. He concluded that it is not something that is simply acted upon but is rather both constitutive and constituted, and is always characterized by movement.

MARÍA VALERIA BERROS's talk on "Law, Catastrophe and Environmentally Displaced Persons" highlighted how different situations of vulnerability have been a theme in the law research field. Legal discussions of vulnerability revolve around (a) the relation among catastrophes and human rights and (b) the environmentally-displaced person's status. Is the protection of human rights observable before, during, and after the catastrophes in the current regulative systems? Is an international convention project filling the legal emptiness surrounding regulation on environmentally-displaced persons?

In "Visualizing Vulnerability and Exposure: A Critical Analysis of Images Framing Vulnerabilities Building on Kate Manzo's Iconography," **BIRGIT SCHNEIDER** discussed whether Kate Manzo's observations in her article "Imaging Vulnerabilities" (*Area 42*, no. 1 [2009]) are still valid today. Schneider used figures from the IPCC report of working group II as well as climate action campaigns that depict vulnerabilities in very different ways.

RUHI DEOL, in "Interpreting Island Vulnerability to Climate Change," discussed how islands are traditionally imagined as isolated microcosms, and how this imaginary has dominated the climate change debate. Deol focused on a re-imagination of islands taking place within the academic and practitioner spheres, and also outlined a concept of vulnerability that integrates both social and ecological systems in the study of island vulnerability.

In "Vulnerability as Descriptive Category: Some Thoughts on Ethnography in an Agrarian-Suicide-Crisis Landscape," **DANIEL MÜNSTER** showed how vulnerability is a category over-determined by applied development policy. Its prominence in policy and the existence of established research tools, such as "vulnerability assessment," gives it an ambivalent potential as a concept to be used in qualitative anthropological work, e.g., on agro-environmental crisis. Münster pointed out critical issues with standard conceptions of vulnerability (objectivist understanding of shocks/stressors, focus on individual or household, human centrism) and considered the potential of the term if conceived to operate at multiple scales and across human–nonhuman registers.

RITA BRARA examined "Vulnerability and the Commons" and demonstrated how vulnerability, whether envisaged as biophysical, social, or combinatory, is socially tackled. Organizing against

vulnerability is apparent in the idea and institution of the commons. But the commons is more than an idea: it is also an enacted practice that counters vulnerability through networking, assembling, speaking and acting. By recounting contemporary examples of how people act in common and come to grips with vulnerabilities and their metamorphosing, Brara attempted to show that the commons constitute safety nets as well as arenas for alternate visions in changing contexts and contests. Commoning practices afford an arsenal of coping strategies that promote resilience and resistance in the face of experienced vulnerabilities and provide robust templates for our environmental futures.

Defining Vulnerability

In essence, vulnerability refers to susceptibility to harm, and all agreed that this is constitutive of the human condition. Realizing its importance and reaching a common understanding of vulnerability, however, has proven difficult. The IPCC has been criticized as failing to understand vulnerability as distinct from the concept of adaptation, resulting in maladaptation and access problems for the “subjects of adaptation.” The concept is rarely used in political theory or economic studies focused on capitalism. As one participant put it, disciplines such as natural hazards and disaster studies widely use and abuse concepts of vulnerability and resilience.

In part, this stems from the multiple definitions of vulnerability that exist in different disciplines. It is linked with (and often explained through) complementary, contrasting, or constitutive concepts. These include security, risk, interdependency, sensitivity, exposure, resilience, access, juridical standing, invulnerability, adaptation, and maladaptation, to name just a few. The equation of vulnerability and poverty, prevalent in “development speak,” has also inhibited understanding of its nuances and the multiple variables that influence it.

Rethinking Vulnerability

Despite these issues, many spoke about vulnerability as a driver for change, and as being provisional and cyclical. A recognition of vulnerability often leads to action, which can either reduce or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, or lead to new ones. A new status quo emerges with action, and vulnerabilities are often shared across space, time, and scale. Vulnerability is also not option-less, and links human beings through relations of interdependence that are vital for our survival.

— Ruhi Deol