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## From labelling weakness to liberatory praxis: a new theory of vulnerability for disaster studies

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# From Labelling Weakness to Liberatory Praxis: A New Theory of Vulnerability for Disaster Studies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - Vulnerability is a label and a concept that is widely used in disaster studies. To date the meaning has been quite limited and implied 'weakness', with criticisms arising periodically but not halting its reproduction. In this paper, we offer a new theory of vulnerability for the field, suggesting that complicating the concept can create space for liberatory discourse and organising.

**Design/methodology/approach** - We draw from diverse understandings of vulnerability to generate new conceptual ground for disaster scholars. We explore the relationships between power and agency, and autonomy and social hierarchy with regards to how vulnerability is considered within neoliberal democracies. We also outline ideological responses and the political actions that follow.

**Findings** - Our exploration is underpinned by dissatisfaction with the way that vulnerability has thus far been theorised in disaster studies. Using the analytical framings provided, we hope that others will build on the idea that so-called 'vulnerable' people, working in solidarity and using intersecting frameworks of anti-racism, anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, can undermine the risk-creating norms of the neoliberal state.

**Originality** - We argue that the dominant framing of vulnerability in disaster studies - and usage of the vulnerability paradigm - provides political traction for neoliberal social projects, based on notions of humanitarianism. We make this claim as a challenge to ourselves and our peers to maintain reflexive scholarship and search for liberatory potential, not only in vulnerability but in other concepts that have become normative.

*Keywords: neoliberal democracy; anti-capitalism; vulnerability; theory; liberation*

## Introduction

Vulnerability is perhaps one of the most used (and abused, as Cannon (2022) argues) concepts in disaster scholarship<sup>1</sup>. Introduced in the 1970s as a way of understanding why disasters happen and who is most affected by them, the vulnerability paradigm highlighted - and still does - the processes that put people at risk and proposed a way of critiquing developmentalism, capitalism, consumerism, materialism, and all other '-isms' that have become so prominent in demonstrating the 'economic progress' of nations while at the same time creating risk through development (see Bankoff, 2019 for a historic overview of the

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evolution of the concept). The vulnerability paradigm has urged us to abandon a still-dominant hazard-centric approach that focuses on technological solutions and often blames 'nature' for disaster risks (Bankoff, 2019; Chmutina and Von Meding, 2019; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). But its well-documented limitations (e.g. in Marino and Faas (2020); Bankoff and Hilhorst (2022); Chmutina *et al.*, (2022)) suggest that perhaps it is time to rethink how we use the concept of vulnerability in relation to disasters. This paper aims to unpack a range of arguments built around vulnerability and, drawing on critical theory, to encourage disaster scholars to challenge ourselves and our peers to maintain reflexive scholarship and search for liberatory potential, not only in vulnerability but in other concepts that have become normative.

In disaster studies, vulnerability is usually framed as a condition with the implied likelihood of experiencing violence or other harm. 'The vulnerable' tend to be framed as people that lack resources, face hardships, are located at the margins of society and generally need support and help both in the day-to-day and specific to disaster (Moncrieffe and Eyben, 2007). Vulnerability can be employed – or be perceived to be employed – in order to portray certain localities and groups of people as fundamentally unstable, unsafe, and in need of intervention (Bankoff, 2001), as "those who need help, [ . . . ] poor victims or passive recipients" (Heijmans, 2004, p. 127). In its normative use, the concept overwhelmingly reflects - and is translated with - a meaning of weakness (Chmutina *et al.*, 2020). This weakness, or 'lack', is often left uninterrogated; it presents the resource landscape as a natural or unavoidable outcome of social and political arrangements. Vulnerability, used in this way, typically implies the need for paternalistic protection; such understanding expands patriarchal norms and further reinforces inequalities. Some, therefore, argue that those facing systemic oppression are made vulnerable through processes overseen by specific actors and institutions, and are actually 'vulnerabilised' (Marino and Faas, 2020; Jacobs, 2021; Rivera *et al.*, 2022).

Portrayed as a 'weakness' (and therefore something 'bad'), in the context of disasters, vulnerability is often used in contrast to resilience (i.e. to differentiate between those who need protection and those who don't), a more positive, aspirational and often rhetorical concept. Despite the possible intention towards transformation (as demonstrated, for instance, by Sou, 2022), it has also been demonstrated to hide the politics and power that create vulnerability (Bracke, 2016). This conflation compels us to understand vulnerability in a personalised sense, as we do resilience (Barrios, 2016; Cheek and Chmutina, 2022). Vulnerability is thus used as a label that obscures any generative potential beyond its normative use in naming and labelling, opening up a space for evaluation and judgement (Jameson, 2020). When the vulnerable are framed as 'victims', this inspires pity, which in some cases may help to build an ethics of care and justice as well as radical politics (Rorty, 1989). But more often than not, pity enables charity frameworks that foreground the spectacle of death and suffering and engage the vulnerable in reactive ways, making the vulnerable governable subjects (Albuero-Cañete, 2022; Danewid, 2017). Wendy Brown notes that pity "delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible" (Brown, 1995, p.27), highlighting that it is usually the victims who are blamed for suffering. What's more, however, is that such labelling as 'weak' by default leads to alienation; the vulnerable become the Other, and are 'framed' as a 'problem' that lies outside of a 'normal' identity (Butler, 2009; Eriksen, 2022). Here a shift occurs in which the

Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM). Upcoming in *Disaster Prevention and Management*, DOI 10.1108/DPM-10-2022-0208. Accepted 07 April, 2023. state marks the vulnerable as posing a threat to the established social order (Chmutina, Von Meding, *et al.*, 2022).

## Reframing Vulnerability

Bankoff and Hilhorst (2022) argue in their latest book that vulnerability still matters; and we agree. Vulnerability is critical for our understanding of disaster risk, but it is also an important concept for those using the related language of resistance. While the so-called “vulnerability paradigm” has historically been perceived as somewhat radical, we have discussed some of the reasons that it has also been compromised, and used to underpin ideological projects of white-saviourism and humanitarianism (rather than solidarity). In his essay on vulnerability, von Meding (2021, p.50) argues that “vulnerability as an openness to violence” encourages us to “respond emotionally and openly to human rights injustices, and privilege otherness.” Because of this, it has been drawn on to generously support notions of liberal democracy as the principal legitimate vehicle for social change. However, in this paper we will build an argument for quite different possibilities in the theorising of vulnerability for disaster studies.

Our premise for this claim is that vulnerability is a shared basic condition as well as a condition of potential (Gilson, 2011); it is the condition that allows us to understand our capacity to and necessity of being in relation with others, and indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency (Butler, 2016) that challenges the dominant ontological devotion to individualism, an essential component of capitalism. And it is the potential of this condition that provides a foundation, rather than an opposition, for resistance; it's a ‘deliberate exposure to power’ (Butler, 2016: 22) that moves us away from the pursuit of invulnerability, and consequently away from mastery over ‘the vulnerable’, i.e. from ‘power over’ to ‘power within’, as this paper will explore.

In disaster studies, the dominant framing of vulnerability provides political traction for neoliberal social projects, based on notions of humanitarianism. Drawing on critical feminist theory on vulnerability enables us to challenge this limited understanding and provide a framework that centres the strength and disobedience of oppressed and marginalised people. Such a remaking of vulnerability would reveal opportunities for resistance, solidarity, and comradeship, where there was previously acceptance of ‘weakness’. Therefore, rather than calling for the abolition of the concept of vulnerability, in a spirit of hope and care we would encourage the critical embrace of the concept in all its complexity. In that vein, in this paper we will theorise the relationship between different key concepts, mapping out the way that things *are* but importantly, suggesting the potentiality of the way things *could be*.

## From Power over to Power within

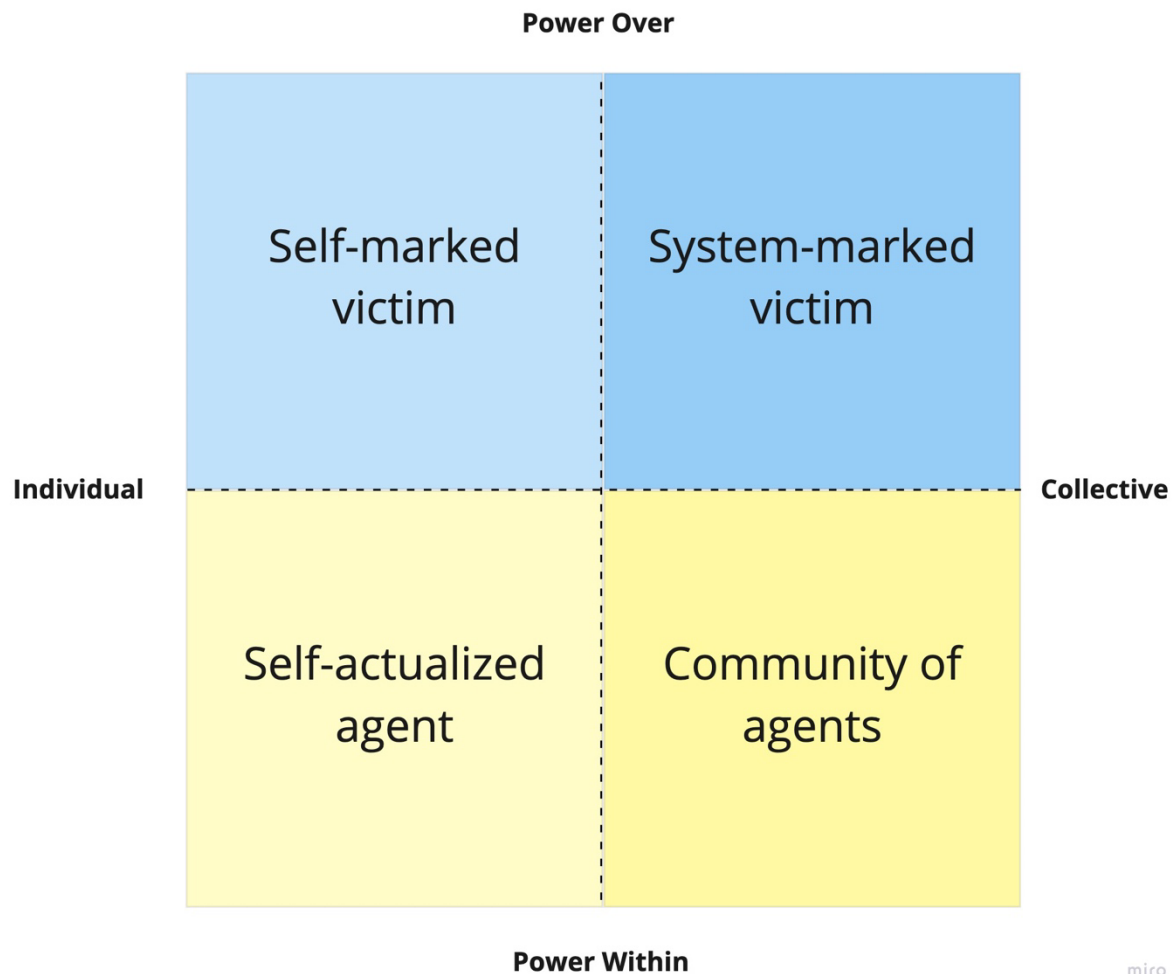
The idea of vulnerability - and the narratives produced by it - are essential in understanding who we are (for ourselves but also for others) and our actions and inactions. We do not see power as positive or negative, but as productive or destructive. The dominant framing of vulnerability across disciplines is built on an understanding of power as ‘power over’, i.e. the type of power that is built on force, coercion, domination and control (e.g. Dahl, 1968). Vulnerability is thus seen as something that must be mastered; you should be responsible for becoming invulnerable - or the capitalist state will either change you to fit the mould, or take away your rights. It reflects the idea that power is finite and therefore can only be held

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by some (few) individuals (Starhawk, 1987). Power over enables one or few individuals to take control and make decisions that impact others - including the reproduction of vulnerability and invulnerability. It is important to note that this reproduction is not passive; it requires active mechanisms in order to be sustained, and these are provided by social structures and institutions that exercise 'power over' (Wright, 2010). Social systems produce substantially more power than is explicable in terms of violence or access to resources (Bourdieu, 1989).

Conversely, power within is founded on self-knowledge as well as the recognition of self-worth and of individual differences whilst respecting others. Power within includes power to (i.e. productive and generative potential to make a difference or achieve something new and power with (i.e. power that grows collaboration and is built on respect, mutual support, solidarity, care, and empowerment) (French, 1986; Morriss, 2002; Veneklasen *et al.*, 2007). Such an approach to power vests the control of naming and utilising vulnerability in the people experiencing it, whether as individuals or collectives, and establishes the necessary conditions for collective resistance. Any capacity to act to change the conditions of vulnerability is related to power orientation, and takes place on a spectrum from individual to collective. Personal responsibility for vulnerability is embedded in capitalist logic, where precarious social conditions are blamed on individual failures. This is reflected in the "resilience-building" agenda that glorifies the neoliberal subject who pulls themselves up by their bootstraps - as a model of obedient citizenship (Cheek and Chmutina, 2022; von Meding, 2021).

In Figure 1, we explore the intersection of power and agency in the conceptualisation of vulnerability: three of the quadrants represent to some degree the current use of the concept of vulnerability in disaster scholarship, while the bottom right represents the reframed vulnerability that this provocation is built upon. Both power orientations (or some combination, y-axis) manifest as individual or collective (or some combination, x-axis). The theory that we are building is framed within the dominant global neoliberal political climate, and would change considerably if we were to consider vulnerability within other political models.



**Figure 1:** Conceptualising vulnerability through the intersection of power and agency (here X-axis represents agency, Y-axis represents Power orientation). By the authors.

At the top left, the ‘*Self-marked victim*’ quadrant shows the good intention that was implied in the concept of vulnerability as adapted by disaster scholarship since the 1970s - the intention of reducing vulnerability is to address the material conditions of individuals that are marginalised in society (Bankoff, 2001; Chambers, 1989; Susman *et al.*, 1983). However, in practice, much of the implied inclusivity is lost because specific needs and interests are not recognised, and people are labelled in a way that falsely indicates homogeneity - e.g. “vulnerable” - to which the state responds. People accepting such a label and respecting a power-over orientation are prone to accepting whatever violence the state mandates (Jacobs, 2021). This vulnerability can indeed be self-loathing. The connotation of weakness implies that being vulnerable equates to being irresponsible, it implies ‘bad’ choices - and many people internalise this belief. We also see vulnerability “naturalised” here as social inequality and injustice that can only ever be responded to in charity. As long as people are obedient to the state - rights are earned - charitable gestures can be expected. It is also important to note that in some cases, vulnerability needs to be ‘performed’ in order to get the attention of the state - here we enter the Catch-22, in which the vulnerable bid for humanitarian aid to the system that made them vulnerable in the first place.

The top right ‘*System-marked victim*’ quadrant implies that the current power system, within which the framing of vulnerability as weakness takes place - causes collectivised harm to

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people in a way that results in mal-development or deprivation (e.g. racialisation). However, labelling certain groups as vulnerable is the manifestation of power relations (Gaillard and Fordham, 2018) that conceals the social and historical contexts and struggles. It is grounded on antagonistic arrangements that result in the exclusion of minorities who are potentially capable of destabilising normalised narratives, discourses and practices (Gambetti, 2016). Vulnerability is a product of human decisions - and therefore correctable and preventable through human agency (Lee, 2016). Health, racial and gender disparities, poverty, denied access to education are all manifestations of structural violence against 'system-marked victims' and occurs through the regular operation of society (Galtung, 1985). When groups organise collectively against systems of oppression, the state violence can keep power structures intact (Arendt, 1970). Consider, for instance, how a Democratic White House has significantly expanded the US police state (Correia and Wall, 2021) in response to the Movement for Black Lives - the opposite of what people asked for.

The bottom left quadrant is the place of *self-actualised agent*; this is where the framing of vulnerability draws attention to the way an individual gains power within - but still on an individual, rather than collective basis. This is where we see people on a mission to become invulnerable (and ideally, 'resilient' - see Cheek and Chmutina, 2022). This striving is closely linked to status: individuals find themselves in a particular place in society that comes with certain experiences, they then internalise a habitus concerning the order of things and, consequently, structure their behaviour to reproduce this social position, or try to move up the social ladder. This can reinforce relations of domination by validating the system of hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1989) and moving people towards the upper quadrants. Individual responses that underpin ideas of capacities and resilience remain apolitical as they are aimed at improving one's situation rather than challenging the system that created that situation in the first place. The leap from this quadrant to the right bottom corner requires significant effort: in particular, it requires individuals to understand their own vulnerability - and consequently, the potential to connect with others and construct a response to its inherent relationality, the capacity to and necessity of being in relation with others (Butler, 2016).

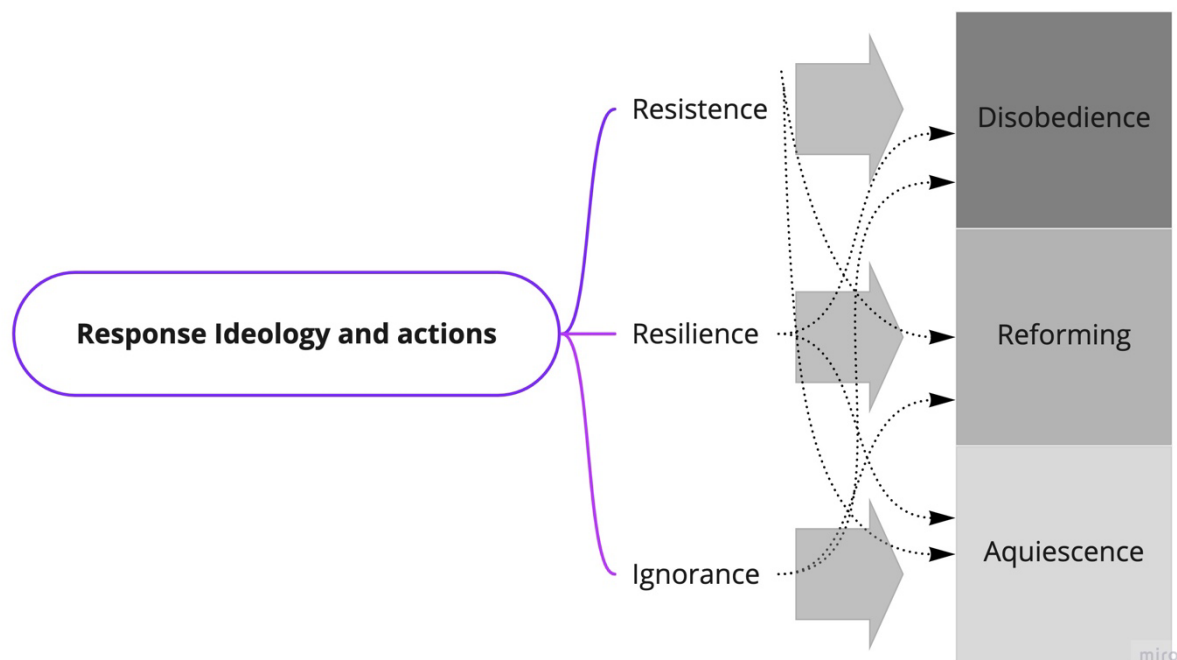
Finally, the aspirational bottom right quadrant '*Community of agents*' shows how a gradual move from Power Over to Power To and Power With is possible. Here, vulnerability can be understood in relation to power in that it is possible 'to act otherwise', to intervene in the world or refrain from such interventions, consequently influencing the state of affairs (Giddens, 1984). In other words, whilst the power may still remain asymmetrical, here we recognise that no one is free of power (Davis, 1991). Here vulnerability is seen as a set of social relations, including practices of resistance, thus allowing us to understand how and why resistance can emerge (Butler, 2020). This articulates "a demand that only supported life can persist as a life" (Butler, 2020, p. 194) and this is *done by demonstrating vulnerability and demonstrating it with vulnerability* (hooks, 2001, p.197). Such framing shows abiding and vital potential of affecting and being affected by others and owning ourselves to others without becoming politically or socially invisible (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). Here, the framing of vulnerability moves from the recognition of oppression to recognition of identity, thus allowing to not only address the social and economic conditions of oppression but already making identity (defined by vulnerability - or injury) historical. Agents operating collectively in this quadrant also contradict the capitalist (and Western) insistence on individual action as a superior moral position (e.g. as argued by Out of the Woods Collective,

Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM). Upcoming in Disaster Prevention and Management, DOI 10.1108/DPM-10-2022-0208. Accepted 07 April, 2023. 2020), and become open to learning from Global South, Indigenous and Black knowledges around collective identity and action (Collins, 2002; Ferdinand, 2021; McKittrick, 2020; Santos, 2016). Vulnerability as resistance can only be achieved in this quadrant.

## The ideological dilemma of responding to vulnerability

Within a society under the dominant influence of neoliberal ideology, almost all responses to vulnerability either try to “build resilience” (and thus depoliticise the process of vulnerablisation) or ignore/minimise the existence of the condition. This leads to vulnerability becoming a part of one’s identity - but as an identity of a victim/survivor. But identifying as such, and perhaps receiving support from the state to “reduce vulnerability”, can exclude them from criticising and challenging the conditions under which they were/are forced to struggle. Here survival is celebrated as an achievement, whereas those who attempt to resist or disobey are met with violence and disdain (Bracke, 2016). The vulnerable are therefore becoming allies to capitalism, creating an illusion of allowing them to navigate an environment of privilege and oppression shaped by neoliberalism, whilst discouraging any attempts of political struggle (Dean, 2019).

Figure 2 outlines what we believe to be the response ideologies to the condition of vulnerability; *Resistance*, *Resilience*, and *Ignorance*. These ideologies are influential in determining political action - the grey arrows represent the most likely political action stemming from each ideology. But we also recognise that quite unexpected political action is possible, if not likely; this is an important point, because the current normative trajectory of the vulnerable - from vulnerability to resilience - does not allow for such multiple paths. In addition, political response does not have to be active - such an idea, in fact, obscures the potentials of outright refusal (Ferguson, 2022).



**Figure 2:** Political responses to conditions of vulnerability. By the authors.



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The ideology of *Ignorance* for us represents the belief that vulnerability is a regrettable state of being that must be responded to with charity, but not system change. This ideology says that the vulnerable do not have the capacity to act and their weakness is a drain on resources and “responsible citizens.” The ideology of *Resilience*, meanwhile, pays homage to the merits of individual action to overcome vulnerability and create a slightly reformed system that grants more opportunities for people to become good citizens; it is built on the idea of ‘merit’. It is only the response ideology of *Resistance* that really understands the complexity of human vulnerability, sees the possibilities for collective disavowal of the system and agitates for the creation of completely different futures than those which easily align with neoliberal values. But it is the state, predominantly driven by these values - and thus the first two ideologies - that is dominant, for now. Most framings of vulnerability in disaster studies are grounded in the ideology of capitalism, where there is no space for ‘us’, and instead everything is about ‘me’; it is indeed a hegemonic ideology that precludes other options. Therefore, we argue that transformation is only possible through refusal and resistance to this dominant theory - through *Resistance*.

*Acquiescence* and *Reforming* as political responses to the *Ignorance* and *Resilience* ideologies in Figure 2 fail to challenge the capitalist status quo, intending respectively rather to pretend that nothing can be done, or to agitate for incremental change. In both cases, the response still relies on the (neo)liberal democratic state to ‘change’ the conditions, which in reality sees piecemeal progress occur, if any. These political responses fit comfortably with the Western narrative of human rights and needs - but this also implies a paradox of liberal rights (Haider, 2018). Rights are granted to generic, ‘empty’ individuals thus ignoring inequality and oppression - and therefore appear to be outside of the political sphere. Yet, when it comes to responding to vulnerability, the idea of rights, as Brown notes, is “more likely to become sites of production and regulation of identity as injury than vehicles of emancipation” (Brown, 1995, p.134). Furthermore, rights granted by a liberal democracy are contingent on obedience and can be removed, as demonstrated, for instance, by (often invisible) border regimes (Walia, 2021). While a politics of *Disobedience* reveals a more transformative pathway, “a victory over oneself, a victory over generalised conformity and inertia of the world” (Gros, 2021, p.9); but it also exposes its proponents to exclusion and violent repression.

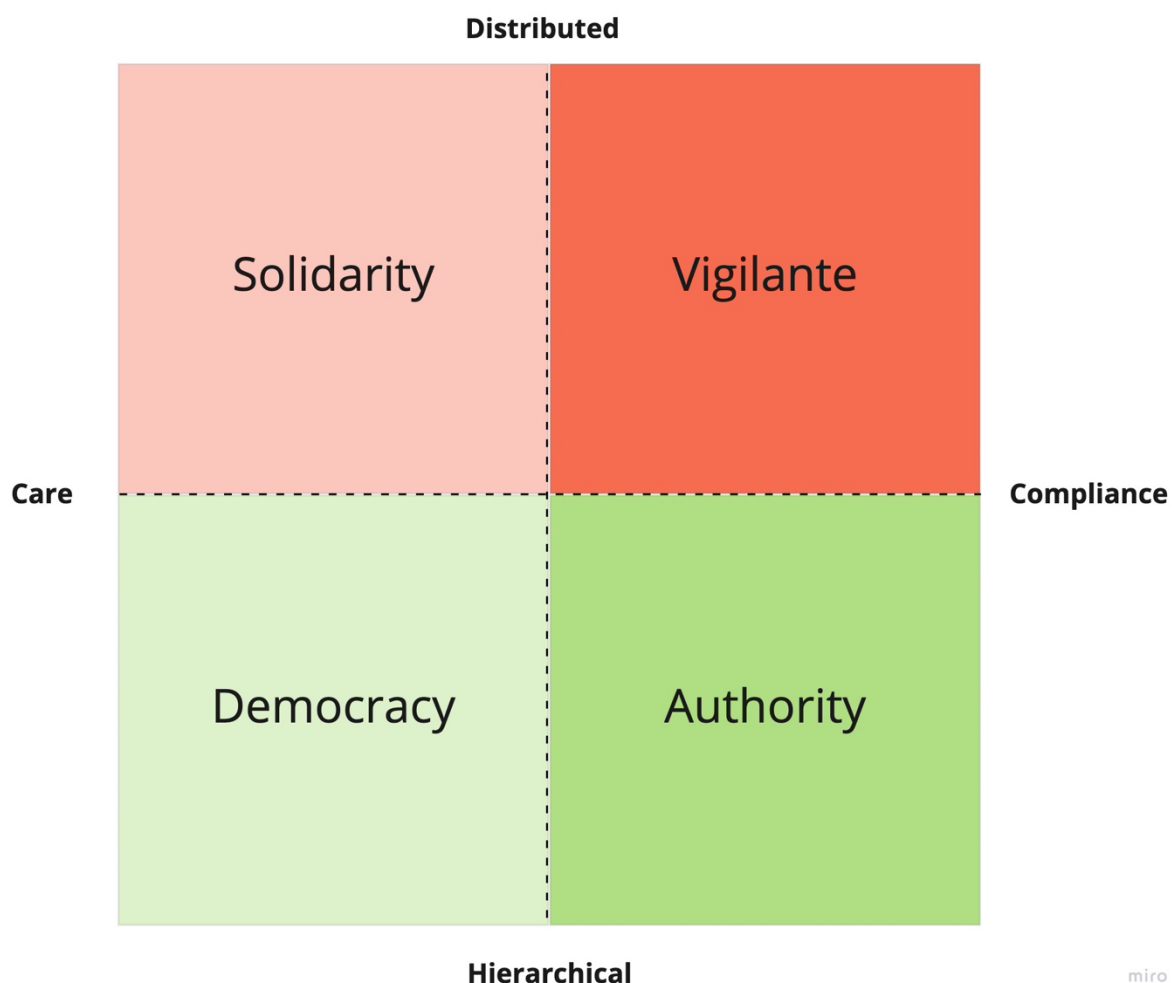
Vulnerability is often identified with passivity or acceptance, and this is why we fail to recognise how it can be such a powerful site of resistance (Butler, 2020). But demonstration of vulnerability becomes a pathway for resistance - for instance, refugees demanding legal papers; as Butler (2020) points out, this is not a miraculous transformation from vulnerability into strength, but an articulation for a demand to live. These demands are a threat to the state, and are often met with violence and coercion (Chmutina et al., 2022). The pressure to comply/compromise can therefore lead away from disobedience to either acquiescence or reforming. Consider the vigour with which resistance movements are brought into establishment politics (e.g. as Vergès (2019) illustrates with regards to ‘civilizational’ feminism); *from disobedience to reforming*.

The challenge here is to articulate resistance politically: too often stories are presented of those who ‘fulfil their dream’ by challenging a few norms, but this is hardly ever presented as a collective struggle, and the reality of structural brutality and cruelty of power are completely hidden. The political struggle is important here because the relations between vulnerability

and politics allows, as Athanasiou points out, to understand ‘the ways in which social norms determine what kind of humanness can become possible, what forms of life become lovable and grievable’ (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 135). The collective is also important because a political relation, a set of expectations for actions towards a common goal are only possible through collective action, highlighting solidarity, while not seeing difference as a barrier (Dean, 2019).

### Autonomy and social hierarchy in contradictory responses to vulnerability

Two more important orientations in relation to our theory of vulnerability for disaster studies are with regards to autonomy and social hierarchy (x-axis and y-axis respectively in Figure 3). Our reframe is positioned in the top left quadrant, while the other three quadrants to varying degrees are representative of manifestations visible under the neoliberal status quo. We argue that, in response to vulnerability, *Distributed* or *Hierarchical* social hierarchies (or some combination, y-axis) manifest in either *Care* or *Compliance* (or some combination, x-axis).



**Figure 3:** Manifestations and orientations of vulnerability (here X-axis represents autonomy, Y-axis represents social hierarchy). By the authors.

A hierarchical orientation prevails in (neo)liberal democracies, as much as the participation of citizens is touted and widely accepted by the public as the only viable pathway for change. But in the self-anointed paragon of liberal democracy, the United States, “*the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy*” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p.575).

In the *Authority* quadrant, vulnerability is seen as opposite to security (Chambers, 1989). Perceived as a weakness, it implies the need of help from the state or the others and consequently animates the perusal of ‘strength’ and a sense of control leading to a clear distinction between those who protect and those who need protection, without any consideration to its historical evolution or socio-political context. Vulnerability thus is an act of naming that is the first step of alienation as phenomenologically it opens a door for judgments and evaluation (and sometimes, taboo) (Jameson, 2020). When protection is not possible or desirable - or the vulnerable disobey - it can easily be substituted by neoliberal rhetoric about individual failures, where the vulnerable are portrayed as a threat to the established social order, property, and the power of the elites. They can be marked as ‘dangerous’ and securitised, with violent repercussions (Chmutina et al. 2022). The aim of such framing of vulnerability allows the design of social life that minimises frictions to neoliberal ‘progress’ and growth: the qualitative issue of vulnerability becomes a quantitative issue of profit and loss (and thus needs addressing) (Scott, 1998). Such quantification is a commodification of social relationships and illustrates the ‘internal border regimes’ by which the state maintains an underclass of ‘vulnerable’ labour by stoking fear about a threat that it actually manufactures (Walia, 2021).

The *Democracy* quadrant represents the current manifestation of social democracy, built on the idea that ‘there is no such thing as society,’ and uses freedom as an instrument of power, ‘shorn of concern for others, the world, or the future’ (Brown, 1995, p.45). It is built on the idea of what Du Bois (1920) calls the “‘manure’ theory of social organisation’: ‘We believe that at the bottom of organised human life there are necessary duties and services which no real human being ought to be compelled to do. We push below this mudslide of derelicts and half-men ... and seek to build above it - Democracy!’ (p. 69). Vulnerability constitutes an ontological condition of being exposed to each other’s care or harm. In this quadrant, when care is chosen it is not an act of solidarity but an ‘un-conflicted human disposition’, which allows us to edit out or project onto others our own aggression (Butler, 2020). In other words, care emerges here as a paternalistic impulse, obliged to intervene. When harm is chosen, this is because the narrative of democracy is rife with dualities that force individuals ‘to balance freedom and equality, conflict and consensus, inclusion and exclusion, coercion and choice, spontaneity and structure, expertise and mass opinion, the local and the global, and the present and the future’ (Taylor, 2019, p.26). This, of course, presents some measure of choice, but the unambiguous resolution of such dualities is not possible, thus creating ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Here, care is paternalistic care that leads to institutional intervention rather than mutual aid (as per Kropotkin, 1902).

In the *Vigilante* quadrant, the narratives of vulnerability may be equated to those of freedom, when the majority - in order to keep their own perceived ‘resilience’ acts as a tool of power enforcement, pushing out those who are not ‘normal’ or forcing compliance. The quadrant is built on the idea of vulnerability as difference, which we “copy if we think it is dominant, or

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destroy it is we think it is subordinate” (Lorde, 1984, p. 108); such an approach is unavoidable in a capitalist society that requires ‘surplus people’ to create profit. Adherents to a compliance-based and distributed approach to ‘vulnerability reduction’ will often determine social norms as to what kind of vulnerability is acceptable and to what extent, prescribing the vast majority of community-based solutions that draw on local capacities as a ‘solution’, thus romanticising and idealising resilience and hiding the structural root causes of vulnerabilities. But if vulnerability is not something to be solved, asserting this is another neoliberal humanitarian approach masquerading as solidarity - and we believe in “solidarity not charity”(Dunson, 2022). We see this demonstrated in the operations of many humanitarian organisations: by masking the relationship of power, they don’t hold to account those who created vulnerability - they rather blame the vulnerable, or nobody - and recreate oppression (Vergès, 2019).

But within the aspirational *Solidarity quadrant* we suggest that a reframed concept of vulnerability would thrive. An approach of non-hierarchical care is committed to relational ties; interdependency and ethical responsibility. This quadrant is a result of a political maturation, a process through which very localised and in some ways disconnected struggles (albeit under the same banner) come together. This process cannot be forced and requires people in the struggle to figure it out (Taylor, 2016) but it is based on mutual support and care. Solidarity is not about consensus. The aim here is not to be ‘the same’ or have ‘one voice’ but to form, asserting the presence of plural, defending our collective precarity and persisting “in the making of equality and many-voiced and unvoiced ways of refusing to become disposable” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 197). Here it is really important that solidarity is not about ‘me’ (so we don’t turn into ‘saints’ - see Butler’s note) but about our responsibility to each other and the collective. So this is not about rallying for *The Vulnerable* as a separate group that could lead to transformation - i.e not about demonstrating vulnerability - but instead, demonstrating collectively *with* vulnerability, because vulnerability only makes sense when it is considered as a part of social relations, including practices of resistance (Butler, 2020). In this quadrant we embrace the power and potential of our own vulnerability, thereby rejecting its disavowal.

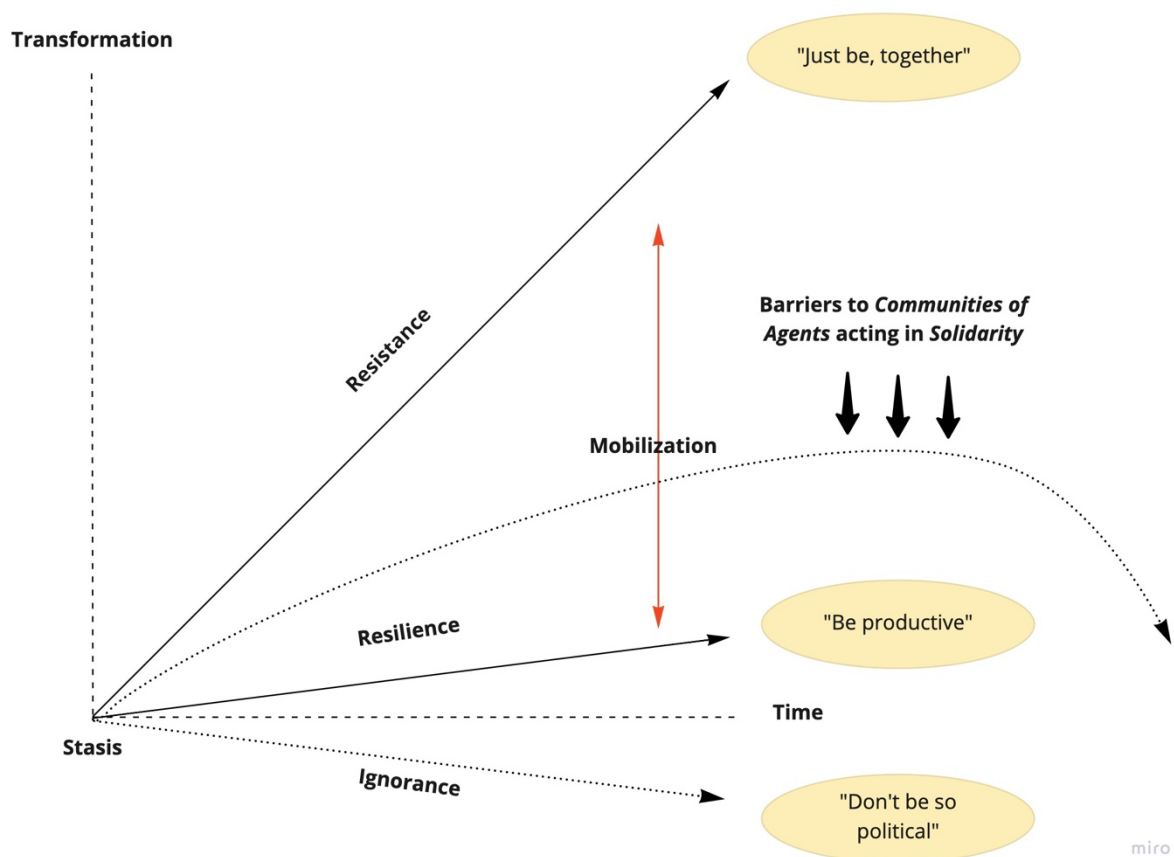
## Pathways towards liberation

In *Abolition Geography* (2022), Ruth Wilson Gilmore articulates how the ‘organized abandonment’ of the state creates individual and collective precarity that accumulates in ‘forgotten places.’ She shows how very different people - with diverse identities, histories and values - who are subjected to the daily violence of ‘normal’ still refuse to give up hope and find ways to work together; not only undermine the system but to create networks of care and solidarity that form the basis of new places. People organising across identities with care and understanding, something modelled so beautifully in Black feminist thought and practice (Taylor, 2017). The most effective challenge to the established order comes when people organise around multiple principles at once, such as those movements drawing on anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist logics.

Organising like this can undermine the very social contract of the state, and build a challenge to the ideology of neoliberalism. Again, using the US as an example, Samudzi and Anderson (2018, p.5) critique the liberal social contract as inherently white supremacist and capitalist, demanding ‘anti-Indigenous and anti-Black exclusions,’ paying lip-service to

notions of equality and liberty while harboring fascistic tendencies. They argue that the United States cannot exist without Black subjection, without precarity and early death - it is foundational to the settler-state social contract and continues to work as intended. Indeed, this 'beacon of democracy' displays all of the neoliberal features that we have so far critiqued, and which we see replicated and adapted around the world. This status quo creates what Gilmore (2022, p.427) calls the "state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production or exploitation of...vulnerability to premature death.' But how are we to respond to this violence?

Labelling the 'victims' of vulnerability is a feature of state-driven neoliberal ideology. Of course, responsibility for the creation of precarity is not forthcoming, but as we have seen in our discussion thus far, the state sanctioned political responses stop far short of transformation. In Figure 4 we attempt to represent how we envisage the potential to mobilise those still adopting a resilience trajectory - arguably the vast majority - for something more generative. Of course, this mobilisation faces numerous barriers underpinned by state repression, media propaganda and the exhaustion brought on by the desperation of life under capitalism.



**Figure 4:** Possible pathways for the so-called 'vulnerable. By the authors.

Most of all, this mobilisation (like any other mobilisation (Garza, 2021)) requires relationships. Earlier we argued the need for a 'community of agents' at the intersection of power and agency. In the face of overwhelming pressure to outsource agency to elected representatives (i.e. 'just vote'), people organising for liberation must react differently to 'organised abandonment,' and invest in each other through, for instance, resource pooling

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and community defence (Samudzi and Anderson, 2018). Rather than political action being limited the support of parties, we see the 'community of agents' as a social relation of what Sitrin (2012, p.11) calls *horizontalidad*, political action that is 'against the hierarchy of the state,' a way to live that refuses and refutes the coercive logics of capital while building more trusting and loving spaces.

It is from an understanding of our interconnectedness *through vulnerability* that solidarity can emerge, the kind of solidarity and resistance that inspired the Black Panther Party (BPP) Community Survival Programs in the 1960s and 70s, as well as more recent solidarity movements such as Occupy and the networks of care that have arisen during the Covid-19 pandemic. While BPP co-founder Huey Newton articulated community defence as the necessary response to oppression (Newton, 1973), a Black feminist approach would argue rather more explicitly for care and love as acts of resistance (e.g. hooks, 2001). Perhaps situated at the intersection of these positions Samudzi and Anderson (2018, p.96) argue that "the work of building a sustained movement dedicated to defending ourselves is all about love". It is in the fight against oppression that mutual aid both meets community needs and creates resistance to the system that manufactures precarity. The discriminatory impacts of disasters never fail to reveal the injustice and inequality of a society, and it is no surprise that this is where mutual aid networks thrive (Spade, 2020). While some will always show disdain for resistance movements, the dominant impulse within neoliberalism is to co-opt or otherwise limit the pace or nature of system change. These factions tell the vulnerable "*don't be so political*" or if they must make political demands, at least "*be productive*" rather than destructive (Gilmore (2022) calls this the professionalisation of activism - a demand for a solution now or else be quiet). After all, haven't we developed the most refined political system possible?

But the fact that a discourse on 'resilience building' has become so mainstream represents a significant opportunity for political action. This is a space for consciousness building - to show people the way *towards resistance*. Towards disobedience. Towards living for collective gratification. Angela Davis (2016, p.106) brings the well-worn feminist slogan 'the personal is political' to life within a contemporary abolitionist frame by showing how the "retributive impulses of the state are inscribed" on us in the way that we react to an affront with violence. We need to respond differently, to stop reproducing oppressive conditions. We must fight back against the state-inscribed impulse in the way vulnerability is conceptualised in disaster studies, and for the most part respond with calls for greater resilience (i.e., vulnerability is bad and must be disavowed).

If we can demonstrate how vulnerability can be a space of contestation and solidarity based in non-hierarchical care for each other, we can also find ways to *move from neoliberal "resilience-building" towards resistance*<sup>1</sup>; in our politics, our practice, and our scholarship - our interconnected lives. We love the call from our comrades at Out of the Woods Collective to build 'antifascist infrastructures' where "bonds of affinity, solidarity and kin-making replace those of blood, property and nation (Out of the Woods Collective, 2020, p.61). In reframing

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<sup>1</sup> Here we use the meaning of 'resistance' that sees it a form of collective civil disobedience that involves physical presence and solidarity. We also recognise the malleable nature of the concept of resilience and have seen it used in ways that fight oppression, and support people to use concepts in any way that furthers their liberation.

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vulnerability as a condition of potential, perhaps we will discover new ways to entangle our lives and deepen our commitment to each other's well-being from a place of mutual care - to be, together. We can thus reject the need to become invulnerable (Von Meding, 2021) and instead embrace the *interbeing - or being together* - taught by Thich Nhat Hanh (2001, p.55).

## Conclusion

We contend that a 'non-ideological' concept of vulnerability, as it is often - intentionally or unintentionally - employed in disaster scholarship reinforces oppression by doing the work of depoliticisation; masking power relationships and obscuring the latent potential for transformation through vulnerability. Transformation is already taking place through political struggles rich in disobedience and resistance within neoliberal democracies, where the oppressed, the marginal and the abandoned are creating new worlds (Gilmore, 2022). Indeed, the so-called 'vulnerable' show us what love, care and solidarity look like every time they face disaster impacts (von Meding, 2021). But disaster scholarship is too often serving only to slow down progress through a broadly 'apolitical' agenda, when not inhibiting change outright.

We therefore hope that this paper will challenge disaster scholars to reflect on how they use vulnerability, and where they position themselves in relation to the different components of problems. We intend it as a provocation towards vigorous and respectful debate. We need to ask different questions, and develop the ability to critique each other most robustly when we use this concept. The inspiration that we draw from beyond disaster studies saturates our arguments and we would love for colleagues to pull some of these threads.

Of course, we do not expect everyone to agree with our reframing of vulnerability - especially given the ideological differences that animate our field - and we would like to hear both challenges and extensions to these initial thoughts. Within the 'empire' of capitalism we are all complicit in different ways (often for survival), so perhaps divergent approaches to the vulnerability dilemma depend on the nature of our entanglement in the system. So much so that being a 'double-agent' might often be necessary (Roy, 2006).

Reframing vulnerability as a condition of potential for transformation through solidarity and connectedness is essential; as Galeano (2000, p.312) notes "unlike solidarity, which is horizontal and takes place between equals, charity is top-down, humiliating those who receive it and never challenging the implicit power relations". Without mutual respect vulnerability can only be framed as a subject of pity or a subject of fear - and neither are really very useful for addressing the root causes of vulnerability and, consequently, disasters. To paraphrase Audre Lorde (2007), p. 32), our vulnerability is our greatest strength - and until we learn this, we will 'rob ourselves of ourselves and of each other'.

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<sup>i</sup> The reader will note many contested and malleable concepts used in this paper, such as 'neoliberalism', 'power' and so on. Much debate has taken place about the definitions of these, and it is not the intention of this paper to rehearse these. We would however encourage a reader in doubt to engage with Patrick Leary's recent book 'Keywords for Capitalism' (2019).