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**Vulnerability, infrastructure, and (non)violence: preliminary thoughts on Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly***

Judith Butler's latest book is a profoundly engaging read, tackling many contemporary burning issues through highly dense theoretical considerations. Many of its passages made me embark on different and often mutually unrelated chains of thoughts and associations, but here I will try to single out three themes for reflection and to establish some connections between them.

One theme that kept emerging as a thread connecting different chapters, which I find impossible to ignore, not only in the context of its presence in the book, but due to its importance for reflecting our contemporary condition more generally, is vulnerability. Even though the book offers many important insights into the conditions generating unequal distribution of precarity and vulnerability – or maybe precisely because it does so – I could not help but think of an opposite process actually taking place: the one of the relatively even distribution of vulnerability we are starting to experience today. Maybe we could claim that this is precisely the reason (or at least one of the reasons) vulnerability has become such a widespread notion and framework for thinking our present political and social conditions. In my mind this leads to a rather pessimistic view: namely, we are overwhelmingly stressing the precarious conditions of our modern lives because of a certain *randomness* of precarity, which hitherto has not been its defining feature. Certain equilibrium of the conditions generating vulnerability – modern history has made us used to relating vulnerability to certain social classes, ethnic and minority groups, or regions in the world (“destined” to be politically and socially unstable) – has collapsed with neoliberalism and geographical and social distribution of vulnerability has become less predictable. And we can already see the confusion this insight is creating – just think of some of the reactions to paralysis we could find on social media after the recent attacks in Paris that went along the lines of “why don't you mourn Beirut bodies the same way you mourn Paris bodies.” Of course this issue is immensely complex, polarizing and certainly deserving of a much more serious approach. But the point is this: we are moving

towards becoming relatively equally vulnerable – exposed to uncertainties and failing infrastructures; or at least previously reliable geographical and social containers of vulnerability no longer work (bodies in Paris can be vulnerable just like bodies in Beirut; bodies of adjunct professors are becoming vulnerable just like the bodies of construction workers). Pessimism comes from this insight: we are resenting not precarity as such, but the fact that it no longer resides in predictable places, that it could affect anyone, even us. This idea should urge us to reconsider our deeply embedded hierarchical visions of humanity.

Another matter I want to briefly turn to is already mentioned – infrastructure. Even though we are usually lamenting its steady decline and the loss of its supportive functions (which we are right to do) – precisely rendering us more vulnerable – here I want to remind of its totality, namely to underline that infrastructure supports inequalities and distribution of vulnerability as well. Many passages in the book indicate precisely this point: the non-pre-political nature of infrastructure, the way very conditions enabling political enactment are political themselves. Infrastructure is not un-biased, it is not neutral – it does not only safeguard us against precarity but simultaneously (re)produces precarious and vulnerable bodies. (As vulnerability stems from relationality; relations are constituted within socio-material contexts [call them cultures, societies, groups...]; contexts are only played out through concrete infrastructures...).

So, finally, for me, the most important question is how to non-ambivalently connect and relate to one another: infrastructure, livable life and non-violence (as livable life is another important thread in Butler's book; an ideal and a norm that has to depend on supportive infrastructure and on the absence of violence). To this we must answer: what is a livable life? It has to be saturated with norms, but whose norms? It has to be supported by infrastructure, which has to be non-exclusive – even though, as it was mentioned, infrastructure is political; and does the non-exclusionary political exist?

At the very end, to summarize my thoughts on these matters and worries they incite, let me ask another question seemingly unrelated to previous concerns: is the life of an untouchable (a Dalit) a livable life? If not, by whose standards? The question is not random, as the train of thoughts that led me here included the figure of Gandhi (being emblematic in the context of Butler's book because of the argument of non-violence as action), his opposition to Ambedkar regarding the latter's fight for the abolition of casts, and possible translation (in terms of the Butler's book) of Gandhi's response to

him: the abolition of casts would destroy the infrastructure of the Indian society, and that would incite violence.

This historical vignette is invoked as a reminder for all our present and future theoretical efforts to preserve and establish infrastructure for enabling livable lives and fighting violence: an argument was raised in the name of preventing violence and preserving infrastructure (by a figure who gave non-violence his name) to maintain one of the most violent systems of human relations this world has ever known.