

VULNERABLE ACCUMULATION:

Etymology:

Vulnerable: from L. vulnerare “to wound;” see also Verletzen (De).

Accumulation: from L. ad “in addition” + / cumulare “to heap up” from cumulus “heap, mass;” see also, die Anhäufung (De).

Genealogy:

A variant of Karl Marx’s “primitive accumulation” that incorporates various discussions of “vulnerability,” “precarity,” and “debt” from the works of Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Rosalyn Deutsche, Silvia Federici, and Elizabeth Povinelli. The concept also developed in relation to theories of the common/s, primitive accumulation, and community articulated by Massimo de Angelis, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Peter Linebaugh, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jason Read.

Definition:

1. The concept¹ of vulnerable accumulation accounts for and incorporates both the economic and affective registers in its description of the processes and activity involved in forms of sociality that arise between people experimenting with social forms (particularly those who are operating outside or against market forces -- and thus without financial remuneration).

2. In the way that the secret history of primitive accumulation explains the creation of capital for Marx, vulnerable accumulation is an overlooked dynamic

force that underpins being-in-common (collectivity understood as an activity and process of being-together).²

a. For Marx, the historical process of primitive accumulation was central to the creation and enclosure of the commons – crucial to the establishment of private property (making private what was held in common). Various processes of primitive accumulation (enclosure, seizure, dispossession, expropriation) continue to be responsible for the privatization of public resources and the destruction of contemporary common/s.

b. Contemporary practices of “commoning” (making public what was private) engage in vulnerable rather than primitive accumulation.³

c. Vulnerable accumulation also describes the process that constitutes the common/s understood as a thing, state, or form.

3. Vulnerability, as both a structure and an experience, is an inevitable part of being-in-common.⁴

a. Whatever grows, is produced, aggregated, created, or amassed within a space of sharing (outside the logic of market exchange) is vulnerable to the logic of the market & market forces, especially in relation to debt (see 1 and 8).

b. In addition, this concept also highlights that all forms of accumulation are vulnerable under capitalism (e.g. the financial crisis of 2008). States, police and armies exist to protect vulnerable capitalist accumulation. There are few formal structures that exist to protect the vulnerable accumulation of groupings, quasi-

institutions, collectivities, and communities.

4. The accumulation of being-in-common results from the repetition of interactions and the compounding of experience and feeling. In cases where there is no financial remuneration, repetition and longevity increase the costs of the endeavor of vulnerable accumulation, but they also enable the collection and aggregation of resources of shared experience, knowledge, trust, and confidence (as well as risk).

5. Vulnerable accumulation is both a symptom of and a reaction to the structural condition referred to as precarity. It accrues because people are atomized and exposed to the violence of capitalism. But it also accrues when people come together to fight the forces of privatization and the conditions of precarity. Vulnerable accumulation stems from a certain kind of availability that is enacted when people come together (whether they acknowledge it or not). It is part of the residue of struggle. It is both a positive force in the struggle, as a mechanism for increased solidarity, and can undermine this same structure of solidarity.

6. The vulnerability of being-in-common is both objective and subjective. It is over-determined and generated from external and internal forces. It grows between participants (and within them) in addition to being conditioned by structural inequality, daily exploitation, and global/ multi-national forces of capitalist accumulation (and dispossession).

7. Vulnerable accumulation is material and immaterial; visible and invisible, tangible and intangible.

8. Debt is a significant aspect of vulnerable accumulation.

a. Financial debt (paid and unpaid labor, capital investment and expenditure).

b. Emotional ties and connection, friendship and affiliations

c. Intellectual and creative debt

d. Favors and labors of and for love.

9. Different kinds of commons and collectivities accumulate different degrees and kinds of vulnerabilities.⁵

10. Like capital itself, vulnerable accumulation and vulnerability are *un-equally* distributed across the globe. Various populations and formations are more susceptible to violence, enclosure, appropriation, monetization, dispossession, and destruction than others.

a. Vulnerable accumulation accrues to a group as a whole and to individuals. However, the weight and power of vulnerability are not necessarily equally distributed both between groups and between members of the same group — and the experience of vulnerability (as a feeling) registers differently at both the level of the group and the individual.

11. This concept describes the way in which the practices of connection, sharing, and being-in-common breed a kind of transformation in those involved in

the production of a collective space/practice/mode of sociality/movement. This transformation and change is porous, messy, and hard to quantify or evaluate.⁶

12. Vulnerable accumulation offers a rubric for accounting that introduces a new term into discourses of value and assessment. This concept is meant to provide a framework for those involved in these practices to take “stock” of their practices, to appreciate and assess the new forms of social relations that are being created.

a. Vulnerable accumulation suggests a way of accounting for the affective and emotional aspects of social movement work that is inclusive, exhaustive, non-normative, cumulative, and attentive to the material conditions that make such work possible. It offers a way to talk about how the possibilities for social transformation within movements (and collaborations) develop and unravel and how attention to the intricacies of the process is exceedingly important (especially in a moment of crisis and/or prolonged struggle).

13. In contrast to discourses that valorize spontaneity, flexibility, instability, and indeterminacy as resistant modes of being, vulnerable accumulation seeks to account for that which has structure and continuity (if only fleeting).

14. The vulnerability of being-in-common is both a weakness and a strength (see 5).

a. The fact of the accumulation of vulnerability exposes the assumption that forms of togetherness (and particularly, forms of togetherness that respect difference) are easy or simply emancipatory things. It seeks to name some of the

paradoxes and difficulties of being-in-common.

15. This concept was conceived by Paige Sarlin in May 2011 as a way to talk about the practice of 16beaver group (the group, website, and space in New York City) and her activities as a member of the US-based International Socialist Organization. Her development of this idea is therefore indebted to her interlocutors in those projects with whom she has organized and talked for the last 12 years. In addition, this concept developed through discussions with participants in the “On the Commons” BRiC and the “La Commune” residency at Banff.

a. The first official citation of this term appears here. Subsequent references will be found in a longer essay about this concept and a publication project in which collective and activist groups will be asked to reflect on how this concept may or may not help them to understand, explain, or advance their practices.

16. Examples of the objects of vulnerable accumulation include: documentation, photographs, sketches, websites, ideas, notes, notebooks, trash, emails, memories, disappointment, life partners, amorous adventures, travel, meals, tea, coffee, encounters, friends, colleagues, introductions, goodbyes, tears, laughter, loss, fear, confidence, faith, re-assurance, arguments, dis-agreements, misunderstandings, opinions, information, criticism, critique, encouragement, correction, affirmation, confirmation, hope, assurance, continuity, time, signs, sunburns, experience, sore throats, video, books, PDFs, camaraderie, jealousy, attention, capital, cultural capital, respect, interest, connections, offers, requests, debt, splinters, muscle strain, bruises, cuts, germs, exhaustion, weariness, surprise,

confusion, frustration, victories, losses, growth, reference, jokes, stories, papers, posters, maps, publications, etc.

Notes:

^{Mark} According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, a concept “posits itself and its object at the same time as it is created.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 22.

^{Mark} Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simon Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

^{Mark} Massimo de Angelis derives the term “commoning” from Peter Linebaugh’s *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. See Massimo de Angelis, “On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo de Angelis and Stavros Stravrides” in *e-flux journal* #17, 06/2010, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/150>.

^{Mark} Lauren Berlant, “Thinking about Feeling Historical” *Emotion, Space, and Society* volume 1, issue 1, October 2008, p. 4.

^{Mark} For definitions of vulnerability, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) and Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

^{Mark} See Lauren Berlant, "Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding)" in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1-13.

Selected Additional Sources:

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