

Vulnerability, Justice and the Responsive State

Date(s) Saturday 14th July 2012 (12:30-17:30)

Contact Workshop Leader: **Professor Sean Coyle** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/law/coyle-sean.aspx>)

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In a series of influential essays, Martha Fineman develops the concept of vulnerability in order to argue for the necessity of a more responsive state, and the role of the state in the creation of a more egalitarian society. Vulnerability must be understood as universal and constant within the human condition, demanding responses rather than solutions. Existing analyses, focused on equal protection or human rights, terminate at the level of addressing discrimination against groups. Instead, the state and its institutions must evolve so as to manage our common vulnerabilities in the light of a more substantive vision of equality, tackling privilege and inequality in an embodied way.

The purpose of this workshop was to introduce and inaugurate the study of human vulnerability, its effects and responses to it, at Birmingham. Professor Martha Fineman (Emory University) <http://www.law.emory.edu/faculty/faculty-profiles/martha-albertson-fineman.html> (<http://www.law.emory.edu/faculty/faculty-profiles/martha-albertson-fineman.html>) is a pioneer of this analysis, where she runs successful and innovative workshops exploring aspects of human vulnerability and the inequalities it fosters. But there is less awareness or systematic study of vulnerability outside Emory, and the purpose of the workshop was to enhance its visibility both in Birmingham and more generally in the UK.

The workshop set out to create a multi- and cross-disciplinary forum for addressing issues relating to vulnerability, allowing this theme to become more visible and more developed in the work of colleagues in areas such as Education, Law, Philosophy, Geography and others, where it may enrich or deepen existing perspectives and reveal unexplored implications. A key purpose of the workshop was to gain a deeper understanding of the variegated nature of vulnerability as an 'embodied' experience by drawing on perspectives from across numerous disciplines, thus furthering the study of human vulnerability itself, and the kind of responses it demands.

The format was an open discussion, based around two pre-circulated articles by Martha Fineman, and brief (10-minute) introductory reflections by invited guests: Martha, Joel Hanisek (Trinity, Dublin) and Professor Fiona de Londras (Durham) This was followed by structured formal sessions as below:

1. The vulnerability thesis
2. Vulnerability and Justice
3. The responsive state

Outcomes

The workshop succeeded in initiating a cross- and multi-disciplinary discussion on the themes announced, with participants remarking upon their interest in taking the ideas further in their own work. There was an appetite for further engagement on these themes by all present, and much encouragement to organize future events.

The workshop created an impetus for establishing cross-University collaboration on themes relating to vulnerability in some shape or form. The IAS has proved invaluable in successfully propagating these themes across schools, departments and colleges within UoB. They have the potential to feed into a great number of diverse areas, reflecting the initial assumptions of the workshop: that human vulnerability is a 'universal' or constant dimension of the human condition, but one that is both varied and complex in the way it is experienced, demanding sophisticated responses.