

CALL FOR PAPERS

Vulnerability, Resilience, and Public Responsibility for Social and Economic Wellbeing

June 13-14, 2014 in Buffalo, N.Y.

A VHC Workshop at SUNY Buffalo Law School, The State University of New York

The U.S. welfare state has long been the focus of competing understandings of human dependency and vulnerability. In a paradigm-shifting response to the 1930s economic crisis, the New Deal emphasized strong public responsibility for achieving economic growth, stability, and protection. From 1945 through 1975, the idea that the federal government has an obligation to protect farmers, families, business and labor against the risks of living and working in an industrial society gained ground. Politically liberal ideas pressed by vigorous social movements expanded the welfare state, gradually providing a degree of economic security for the poor and the middle class. During these years of economic growth, increased federal spending provided health, education, housing, social service, infrastructure, and other resources that enabled individuals, families and communities to “manage [their] common vulnerabilities” from cradle to grave. The paradigm shift remained incomplete, contested and often theoretically and practically unclear, particularly along race, class, and gender divides. Nonetheless, the expanded welfare state represented major steps away from the laissez-faire vision that blamed and punished victims of social and economic forces beyond individual control toward recognition of the need and value of public or collective responsibility for society generally and each of its members individually.

The second major economic crisis of the 20th century began in the mid-1970s and led to a U-turn in public policy. Interpreting the New Deal paradigm as hindering economic recovery, leaders imposed neoliberal policies that valorized a private market and “meritocracy” and called for smaller government and return to the laissez faire ideal in which individuals and families were seen as primarily responsible for securing their own well-being. Neoliberal policies include (1) retrenchment of social welfare programs, (2) tax cuts, especially for the wealthy and for corporations, (3) devolution of socioeconomic responsibilities away from the federal government to the states (though combined with increased international regulatory protection for capital interests and corporations), (4) privatization that shifts responsibility for the general welfare from the state to the private market, (5) and new legal and economic barriers to social movements and collective action resisting these policies. The resulting upward redistribution of resources and protections- both public and private-has been accompanied by sharply rising rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality and dwindling support for housing, education, health, and other critical resources. However, the call for limited government has not precluded major expansions of governmental activity in two significant areas: providing benefits and protections for globally mobile corporations and capital interests and generating policies and practices that have led to mass incarceration. Both expansions have profoundly affected communities defined by race and poverty.

This workshop seeks to use the vulnerability lens to explore insights and create opportunities that might develop the concepts and vocabulary to allow us to confront foundational neoliberal assumptions and move to a paradigm that emphasizes the universality, constancy, and inevitability of human dependency and vulnerability. How can we frame arguments for the state and its institutions to provide true equality of access and opportunity so that everyone can gain the resilience necessary to manage life’s crises and take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves over the life course?

****Vulnerability and Resilience**

Background Reading at:

<http://web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability>

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****Submissions Procedure:**

Email a proposal as a Word or PDF document by Feb. 24, 2014 to Yvana Mols, ymols@emory.edu

**Decisions will be made by March 7 and working paper drafts will be due May 19 so they can be duplicated and distributed prior to the Workshop.

Workshop Details:

The Workshop begins Friday at 4PM, 509 O’Brian Hall, Putnam Way, Buffalo, NY. Dinner will follow Friday’s session. Panels continue on Saturday from 9 AM to 5PM; breakfast and lunch will be provided.

Issues For Discussion May Include:

- What are the contradictions and tensions that shape the welfare state?
- How have these tensions materialized over time and what kind of struggles have they sparked?
- How should we understand the state and its responsibilities toward society’s institutions and individuals?
- What role should state control or regulation play in monitoring (and defining) “responsible” behavior in regard to social and economic well-being?
- What is the relationship between economic and social justice and other forms of justice (civil, criminal, political, gender)?
- How should we understand the relationship between the state, human beings, and inhuman subjects – such as corporations – and what responsibilities and rights should follow from these privatized collective economic entities?
- How can we address neoliberal assumptions about the human condition, the role of the market and the role of the state?
- How can we counter the demonization of the poor as “takers”; welfare queens; oversexed; lazy and dependent?
- How can we unmask the privileges conferred by privatization and valorization of a “free market,” cast as essential for efficiency, productivity, and economic growth?
- Is it possible to reconcile the concepts of vulnerability and dependency with ideas of liberty, choice and autonomy?
- How effectively do current organized efforts at resistance address the failure of the neoliberal state to recognize and respond to dependency and vulnerability as fundamental components of the human conditions?