

Les Impromptus du LPED #6. La vulnérabilité. A l'encontre des idées reçues

Introduction

...However, it is also the case of specific social groups or whole segments of a society defined by objective factors such as, for example, their gender or their age. Thus, the significant differences in mortality rates, access to healthcare, and or to education enable us to identify a group of people often considered to be the textbook example of vulnerability: women, and as a consequence, their children. Hence the creation and development of women's studies in the 1990s. In other contexts, vulnerability is seen only to affect individuals or groups of individuals whom it is possible to characterise such as elderly people, disabled people, people suffering from illness, refugees etc.

Overall, vulnerability can be grasped by potentiality, meaning the risk of having to face dire consequences following a during a situation of crisis (Chambers, 1989; Soulet, 2006). Vulnerable people or groups or are thus the people or the groups of people who are likely, if less favourable circumstances arise, to lose some of their quality of life, wellbeing, income and so on. Generally, vulnerability is defined in relation to specific threats or risks. These can be divided into two main categories: firstly, those linked to exterior events such as environmental or natural disasters and political violence. Secondly, those directly related to the individual such as health problems, loss of income, the passing of a close friend or family member or any other social break-up. Two factors can be used to differentiate vulnerable people or groups from one another once such a situation arises: how exposed a person is to the risk and their capacity to overcome it (Schröder-Butterfill et Marianti, 2006).

This exposure to risk is linked to the different probabilities of being affected by this said risk at a point in time (Delor et Hubert, 2003). One's degree of exposure to risk changes according to their individual or group characteristics, which is why, some people and groups are defined as "at risk". The most commonly used indicators (factors, social determinants) of exposure to risk include the ownership of assets, housing characteristics, activity status and transfers. It should be noted some of these are also used as indicators of poverty. According to some, poverty is in of itself a factor of risk (Williams, 2003, p.212). According to others, poverty is simply closely associated with vulnerability. The existence of this connection is widely reported by international organisations for example with the case of the feminisation of poverty (World Bank, 2015).

However, exposure to risk is not enough to define vulnerability since within a group of people at risk, some will be able to overcome a shock while others will not. A person or a group of people's resilience, meaning their ability to overcome a loss of well-being due to a shock can thus be contrasted to the vulnerability of those who fail to overcome such a loss of well-being (Courade et de Suremain, 2001). Therefore, discussing vulnerability implies discussing resilience, an expression imported directly from psychology (Cyrulnik, 1999) by social sciences. Compared to other vulnerable people, resilient people are the ones who are able to overcome a shock once it has taken place. Vulnerability and resilience vary depending on the context in which the event takes place. Studying

them calls for analysis that go beyond individual perspective and take into account different contextual and collective scales (Wild, Wiles and Allen, 2013, p150), for example a person's social circle, family or state support-networks.

The social setting is crucial to understanding the vulnerability linked to the type of social relations of a person or a group to a specific event. The "areas of vulnerability" can overlap (Watts and Bohle, 1993). Understanding an "area of vulnerability" entails taking into account simultaneously the factors of exposure, of capacity and likelihood of risk, as well as, social trajectories, social interaction and setting in both subjective and objective aspects (Delor and Hubert, 2003; Watts et Bohle, 1993). It should be noted once again that the risks are not equal for everyone. The difference in impact can be seen through social relationships by making explicit the social mechanisms that produce and reproduce these inequalities to risk. Therefore, the study of vulnerability seems intrinsic to the analysis of inequalities (distance, variations, differences).

The idea of combining these texts on vulnerability stems from acknowledging the ubiquity of the term "vulnerability" in the different fields of the social sciences and in everyday speech without it being understood in its setting of concrete social situations. Here, the question is less that of the definition of vulnerabilities than that of the variety of themes and disciplinary fields in which it is used. The recurring use of the term vulnerability by researchers (of all and any discipline) rarely makes it simple to understand the contents comprised by it. The vast majority of the literature on vulnerability relies on implicit meanings that need to be deconstructed in order for the language used to be accessible to all. In order to achieve this, we have chosen to use shorter chapters and a writing style which we hope will be accessible to wider audiences.

The groundwork of this issue of the Impromptus started with a day-long seminar at the LPED on the 5th of December 2016. Most participants' contributions highlighted the way in which the concept of vulnerability has been repurposed in different areas of their own fields of study. Following this introductory chapter, the nine other chapters of this issue of the Impromptus include some of the ideas put forward on that day and some aspects the debates which took place. These chapters are regrouped into three parts. The first part looks at the relationship between vulnerability and the theme of migrations. What is the meaning of the term "vulnerability" used by the International Organisation for Migrants? To which situations does the notion of vulnerability refer when studying refugee populations?

In the second part, vulnerability is studied through its ties to family, gender and health. It will discuss the vulnerability of women and the elderly as well as the link between stigmatisation and vulnerability in the context of illness.

The third and final part discusses the vulnerability of populations to environmental and climatic hazards. Its four chapters will look at the relationship between environment and vulnerability and conclude by reflecting on the fragility and complexity of vulnerability as a concept but also on its great use for conceptualising public policy.

Overall, the chapters of this volume outline the different approaches to social and environmental vulnerability. Rather than attempting to dive into in-depth research and studies our aim is to use a

collection of recent works to document the diversity and complementarity of approaches to the field of vulnerability, of risk and of resilience. While doing that, this volume will also dismantle a number of preconceptions often circulated by the media or other non-scientific sources.