

GIANFRANCESCO ZANETTI, *EQUALITY AND VULNERABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ITALIAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY. ITALIAN EFFICACY*, SPRINGER, CHAM, 2023, 135 PP.

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The volume stems from reflections emerged during classes of the PhD program in Italian Studies that Professor Zanetti conducted at the University of Berkeley (California) during the spring of 2021.

Thoughts arisen by his researches, but also by the debate with his students, gave the Author the opportunity to find a thread that connects the Italian political-philosophical agenda, that is to say: equality as practice (p. 4).

This 'kind' of equality, linked to a perceived phenomenon of vulnerability (p. 6-9), "is a way of making sense of that very world, at the same time criticizing those valuable narratives of universal equality that are meant to somehow legitimize bare efficacy phenomena" (p. 10).

Following the title of the book, it is possible to gather the contributions of the authors in three groups, relating to three key-concepts: equality, vulnerability and efficacy.

Starting from the notion of equality means starting from Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), particularly from the distinction between *basic equality* and *equality as a goal*.

The first notion implies to sustain that all human beings are equal, because God said to believe in it. However, it is possible that differences exist: there are some conditions that are not always equal. Not because the nature of some human beings is different, but because of the social structure, that makes some groups of people more vulnerable than others (and therefore not equal). In this case, it is possible to achieve equality, so that

equality as a practice becomes a prius, while basic equality becomes the outcome, the *posterius* (p. 60-61).

With the masterpiece of Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794), *On Crime and Punishments* (1764) it is possible to grasp some problematic issues of equality, through the lens of his twin notion of vulnerability. According to Beccaria, in fact, it is empirical evidence that each human being shares the same feelings and selfish reasons, which make their potential decisions and feelings predictable. However, this universal notion of ‘humanity,’ and therefore his narrative of equality and neutrality is about individuals (p. 70-71). In other words, Beccaria gives a formal notion of equality, so he cannot identify any situated vulnerability. Consequently, while general and abstract laws may effectively address certain issues of inequality—such as those pertaining to rigid caste systems—they may fail to address other cases of vulnerability that are equally substantial (p. 69-73).

For the fascist author Santi Romano (1875-1947), equality becomes something that does not necessarily exist. In fact—as Zanetti highlights—in authoritarian states, inequalities and discriminations *can* and *do* exist. However, inequalities can also exist in normative systems that claim to fight against it. Sometimes, a normative horizon may present equality as universal, even though it is, in reality, partial. In this way, inequalities and discriminations become *invisible* and perhaps even more insidious than explicit ones (p. 94).

Equality is strictly connected with vulnerability—the second key-notion of this book—in *The Duties of Men* (1862) of Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872). In fact, on the one hand, all human beings are equal, because they are all vulnerable; on the other hand, equality is more than just a static value defined once and for all; it is a practice activated in response to instances of contingent vulnerability, potentially facilitated by the natural sociability and inherent empathy of human beings. Furthermore, Mazzini recognized that situated individuals and their vulnerabilities result from practices and institutions of inequality, and he claimed the importance of the vulnerable groups to advance the general notion of *equality* (p.83-88). On the contrary, with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), vulnerabilities are hidden: there is no need of “equality-as-a-practice” (p. 20), since every piece falls into place, thanks to the will of the God.

Concerning the notion of vulnerability, it is also possible to mention Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and his masterpiece, *The Prince* (1532), in which the figure represented as vulnerable is not a minority—as in Mazzini’s thought—but the Prince himself, mainly because of *fortuna*, the constantly changing background circumstances, which always carry the risk of ruin, *ruinare* (p. 25-29).

As it is known, Niccolò Machiavelli, has inspired many authors. One of them was Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1676), who—starting from Machiavelli—gave a different

meaning to the concept of *vulnerability*. In fact, according to him, the reason for human vulnerability lies in the fact that technical rules—necessary for success and achieving goals—are applied to individuals and, for this reason, operate to the detriment of other individuals (p. 38-39).

Then, ‘thanks to’ Emilio Salgari (1862-1911) and Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), it is possible to analyze the main expression of situated vulnerability in Italy, that is, the one that emerges from the notion of ‘race’.

In particular, the lawyer and physician Cesare Lombroso claimed that criminal acts and sociopathic behaviors were linked to anatomical features and biology, while Emilio Salgari—author of more than eighty novels—appears to express full-fledged racist declarations, as Zanetti notes: “in his books, some ‘races’ are clearly seen as physically and morally superior than others” (p. 100).

Aldo Braibanti’s notion of vulnerability comes from his own experience. More precisely, this connection is shown by narrating the story of Braibanti and his friend, Giovanni Sanfratello (1940-2017), who was treated in a mental hospital for fifteen months, with several electroshocks and insulin shocks. Braibanti (1922-2014) was accused by Giovanni’s family of *plagio*, and after a long trial, he was condemned to serve time for nine years. According to Zanetti, this is a “tale of two vulnerabilities” (p. 119), since Braibanti was rendered vulnerable by the judicial trial, which accepted the narrative given by Giovanni Sanfratello’s father, while Giovanni Sanfratello was made vulnerable by his family and the treatments in the clinic.

In fact, Braibanti belonged to a minority, while Sanfratello to a majority. Nevertheless, they were vulnerable for the very same reasons: they were both artists, young intellectuals, bohemians, and homosexuals (p. 119-123).

As specified in the chapter on Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) (p. 127-135), figures like Braibanti, who are members of inclusive groups, are in a vulnerable position because they are considered to be in disharmony with the pre-existing mainstream narrative, in which they can and must be sacrificed (p. 132).

The last key-notion which links many authors in this book is the *efficacy*.

According to Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576), this notion is strictly linked to virtue and basic vulnerability of every single human being. In fact, efficacy and a favorable position of power are essential for addressing the final challenge and achieving goals successfully. Furthermore, the goal must not be only a technical success; it also involves institutional values, preserved in the Italian republican tradition, such as virtue and glory (p. 42-45).

In the chapter about Giovanni Della Casa (1503-1556) and Giovanni Nevizzano (late XV cent.- 1540) the Author asks: “Could the peak and ground of legal validity be

efficacy?” (p. 47). In the light of all the reflections made in the context of this book, and particularly in this chapter, the answer could be: yes, of course; the condition of efficacy, endowed with its own legitimacy, is certainly a source of the law itself (p. 48).

Regarding efficacy, it is finally worth mentioning Arturo Carlo Jemolo (1891-1981), who described efficacy phenomena—which the Author called ‘islands’—as existing within a pluralism of narratives that are not necessarily compatible with one another. One example is the family, which is described as “the rock among waves, and the granite which forms the bedrock that belongs to the world of the affects, [...] to morality, to religion, not to the world of the law”¹ (p. 115).

In light of all these reflections, it is possible to state that *Equality and Vulnerability in the Context of Italian Political Philosophy* is an agile yet very dense book, through which it is possible to grasp crucial and acute suggestions, by examining Italian Philosophy of Law through the original lenses of equality, vulnerability, and efficacy.

¹ A.C. (1957). La famiglia e il diritto. In L. Scavo Lombardo (ed.). *Pagine sparse di diritto e storiografia*. (p. 241). Giuffrè.