A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method to investigate ‘difficult knowledge’

Michalinos Zembylas
Published online on: 13 May 2021

How to cite :- Michalinos Zembylas. 13 May 2021, A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method to investigate ‘difficult knowledge’ from: The Handbook of Critical Theoretical Research Methods in Education Routledge
Accessed on: 08 Jun 2023

Please scroll down for document

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
4 A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method to investigate ‘difficult knowledge’

Michalinos Zembylas

Introduction

This chapter explores how Giorgio Agamben’s theory of biopower and Judith Butler’s work on political vulnerability function as methodological ‘tools’ to investigate difficult knowledge. The notion of ‘difficult knowledge’ has been proposed by Deborah Britzman (Britzman, 1998, 2000, 2013; Britzman & Pitt, 2004; Pitt & Britzman, 2003) to denote the affective and epistemological challenges in teaching and learning about/from social and historical traumas. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Agamben’s and Butler’s theoretical approaches as methodologies that enable scholars and educators to explore the topic of difficult knowledge and enrich its theorization in education. It argues that these approaches help us think more critically and reflexively not only about how and why difficult knowledge is constituted but also how and why difficult knowledge can be ethically, politically and affectively engaged in more nuanced ways.

Agamben’s theory of biopower invokes a scrutinization of taken-for-granted perspectives about power and the body. In this manner, Agamben’s theory can be applied to enrich understandings of the historical, political, ethical and affective dimensions of difficult knowledge, precisely because of the ways Agamben helps us pay attention to how power and the body work together. Agamben’s contribution, then, has a methodological function insofar as it offers an analytic lens through which to reconfigure difficult knowledge by taking into consideration the implications of the body-power entanglement.

Similarly, Butler’s approach to political vulnerability also challenges taken-for-granted perspectives about power, bodies, materiality, trauma and grievable lives. As Riach, Rumens and Tyler (2016) advocate, a Butlerian-inspired methodology which is premised upon a performative ontology opens methodological possibilities for developing a critical and self-reflexive analysis. These openings, Riach and her colleagues argue, formulate spaces of exploration that have the potential to undo assumptions about the coherence of subjectivities and the normative conditions upon which they depend. Butler’s approach, therefore, functions methodologically by enabling us to challenge normative categories when we investigate issues emerging from engaging with difficult knowledge (see also, Zembylas, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019).
A methodological synthesis of Agamben’s and Butler’s approaches – which I call here a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability – makes an important intervention to the central concern that drives this chapter, that is, to understand how these approaches work methodologically to offer a more nuanced “analytical front” (Foucault, 1997, p. 51) about difficult knowledge in education. Critical recognition of the epistemological and ontological grounding of theories is important in understanding how different approaches might frame attempts to theorize various topics in education such as difficult knowledge. Importantly, our theoretical choices function as critical methodological tools insofar as they enable us to delve deeper into the historical, ethical and political dimensions of educational topics and therefore to change the grounds of our claims and interests.

The present chapter is organized in the following manner. The first part revisits Britzman’s notion of difficult knowledge, highlighting its contribution in thinking about traumatic representations in the classroom, while recognizing some of the limitations of its psychoanalytic grounding. The next part considers Agamben’s theory on biopower – with a particular emphasis on his notions of bare life and the camp; the purpose here is to provide an overview of these notions to show how his approach functions methodologically to theorize biopower. Then, I discuss Butler’s approach to political vulnerability, again to highlight how her theorization works methodologically to analyze the issues of subjectivity and trauma that are central to difficult knowledge. The last part of the chapter discusses how a combined framework of Agamben’s and Butler’s approaches, that is, a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability, offers critical methodologies that enable the theorization of more nuanced ethical, affective and political ways to engage with difficult knowledge.

Difficult knowledge

Britzman (1998) has initially used the term ‘difficult knowledge’ while discussing how the Diary of Anne Frank is taught in school curriculum as part of Holocaust education. She has pointed out that the diary provides an opportunity to raise difficult questions about the learner’s painful encounter with victimization, aggression and hatred. Britzman has used ‘difficult knowledge’ to signify both representations of social and historical traumas in curriculum and the learner’s encounters with them in pedagogy (see also Pitt & Britzman, 2003). What is essentially ‘difficult’ about knowledge that stems from trauma is the experience of “encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755), namely, the moments in which “knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding” (Simon, 2011a, p. 433).

Britzman’s theorization is grounded in psychoanalytic theory and specifically on the unconscious processes (e.g. deferred action, transference, symbolization) that seem to construct difficulty when facing knowledge of trauma.
and suffering. As I noted elsewhere (see Zembylas, 2014), although Britzman’s analysis does not miss the explicitly political nature of difficult knowledge, it does not offer us a political and activist orientation. This is in part because the construct of difficult knowledge is pedagogically oriented rather than politically driven. If we want a more explicitly ethical or political orientation of theorizing difficult knowledge, other theoretical approaches – such as the ones discussed in this chapter – could complement psychoanalytic perspectives.

In my earlier analysis of Britzman’s theorization of difficult knowledge, I identified three important elements that are present in her psychoanalytic reading of difficult knowledge (Zembylas, 2014). The first element in Britzman’s theorization of difficult knowledge concerns the representations of social and historical traumas and the realization that these representations can never signify all of the emotions as well as the consequences resulting from traumatic events. To put this differently: it is impossible to find ways that do justice to the signification of conflict, violence, loss and death. The second element in Britzman’s theorization of difficult knowledge has to do with the way that representations of trauma are felt, understood and interpreted by the learner. As Simon (2011a) explains: “Difficulty happens when one’s conceptual frameworks, emotional attachments and conscious and unconscious desires delimit one’s ability to settle the meaning of past events” (p. 434). This means that difficult knowledge is situated in the learner’s own psychic history and the conflict between his or her inner and outer world. Finally, the third element of Britzman’s theorization of difficult knowledge has to do with the pedagogical treatment of the learner’s affective dissonance and loss. In facing affective dissonance and loss, teachers and learners are confronted with the impossibility of un-doing the harm and suffering that has taken place. Britzman (2000) suggests that by making trauma pedagogical, learners can develop some hope and repARATION rather than being stuck in despair and the work of memorializing loss.

Subsequent work in recent years has further developed theorization of ‘difficult knowledge’, mostly drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives, in the context of museum exhibitions (e.g. Failler, Ives, & Milne, 2015; Lehrer, Milton, & Patterson, 2011; Simon, 2011a, 2011b), social studies (e.g. Garrett, 2011), art education (e.g. Cohen-Evron, 2005), language and literature (e.g. Tarc, 2011), social justice education (e.g. Sonu, 2016; Taylor, 2011), human rights education (e.g. Milne, 2015) and history education (e.g. Farley, 2009; Matthews, 2009). The scholars who have further deployed and developed the concept of difficult knowledge have made significant contributions that widen our understanding of how to make trauma pedagogical and how to theorize traumatic representations of difficult issues in ways that take into consideration the ethical, affective, and political implications.

For example, Farley’s (2009) theorization builds on Britzman’s psychoanalytic work by highlighting the affective force of difficult knowledge and its impact on examining individual and collective emotional forces and encounters in contexts of conflict. Farley’s point is that the affective force of difficult knowledge and its signification implies “having to tolerate the loss of
certainty in the very effort to know” (ibid.). A similar argument is made by Simon (2011a, 2011b) who suggests that a pedagogy that accommodates difficult knowledge would have to entail uncertainty, disruption and conflict in how affective dissonance is understood. Also, Matthews (2009) draws on psychoanalytic theory to examine how one’s present-day attachments to historical objects (e.g. excitement with Hitler’s car) “repeat the dynamics of earlier psychical conflicts, including the conflicts of learning to find the self in the world” (p. 52). Matthews suggests that the process of coming to find one’s self through the difficult time of adolescent development is entangled with historical objects and narratives. What Farley, Simon and Matthews highlight through the use of psychoanalytic theory is that learning is inextricably linked to the uncertainty and complexity that organize our affective responses to difficult knowledge.

Furthermore, Taylor (2011) draws on psychoanalytically informed research to examine the qualities of global justice education that render teaching and learning both paradoxical and difficult. These difficult qualities include, for example, the psychic struggles of helplessness, the ethical implications involved, and the limitations of arguments about common humanity. Taylor suggests that pedagogies of difficult knowledge include tolerating the inadequacies and uncertainties of learners’ responses as well as the loss of mastery and hope. Also, Tarc (2011) theorizes “the intrapersonal and inter-political dynamics of psychical and social reparation” (p. 350), advancing the idea of what she calls the ‘reparative curriculum’ – an attempt to develop and sustain reparative relations in the context of education. Drawing on psychoanalytic and curriculum theory to analyze processes of psychical and social reparation, Tarc extends Britzman’s (2000) work to suggest that psychical theories of reparative learning might supplement calls for political and ethical interventions in histories of trauma.

All in all, Britzman’s pioneering work has offered the provocation to engage with the construct of difficult knowledge – a construct that is shown to have influenced theoretical work around teaching and learning social and historical trauma. Taken together, this body of work is inspired by Britzman’s psychoanalytic lens to investigate difficult knowledge and its pedagogical implications. However, if we are seeking to further address difficult knowledge as an ethical and political project that inspires social action for change, then psychoanalytic perspectives need to be enhanced with other theoretical insights. The next two parts of the chapter explore the insights offered by Agamben and Butler.

**Agamben, bare life and the camp**

In its broadest sense, biopower is understood as power over life. In his *Homo Sacer* trilogy (Agamben, 1998, 2002, 2005), Agamben offers a reformulation of Foucault’s formation of biopower. Foucault (1990, 2003, 2007) used the term ‘biopower’ to designate the mechanisms through which disciplinary strategies (enforced by producing docile bodies within sites such as the prison, the school and the hospital) were replaced in modern times by a biopolitics whose power
was the regulation of the life of populations. Two important constructs that are used by Agamben to formulate his theory of biopower are ‘bare life’ and the ‘camp’.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben (1998) suggests that the first move of classical Western politics was the separation of the biological and the political, as seen in Aristotle’s separation between life in the *polis* (i.e. *bios*, the political life) and *zoē* (i.e. biological life) or *bare life*, as Agamben calls it. As he writes: “The entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis – the politicization of bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought” (1998, p. 4). According to Agamben (1998), the separation of *zoē* and *bios* is constituted by the simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of bare life. That is, the exclusion of biological life from political life is at the same time an inclusion, because *zoē* is there as that which is excluded: it is included by the very process of exclusion. As Agamben explains:

> The fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion. (1998, p. 8)

Agamben thus asserts that all power is by its nature biopower that is constituted by its ability to suspend itself in a state of exception and determine who lives and who dies. For Agamben (2002), Auschwitz represented the classic example of this process, in which human bodies had been declared merely to be biological, hence allowing their erasure without any consequences for the perpetrators.

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation.

(1998, p. 171)

When *zoē* is included through an exclusion from political life, then bare life (naked life) is produced. Agamben goes as far as claiming that, “Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West” (1998, p. 181). Governments, for example, suspend essential civil liberties in times of social crisis and decide who can be excluded and who can be included. In this sense, the logic of the camp is transformed into a form of sociality and is generalized (ibid., pp. 20, 174–175); consequently, the camp signifies a state of exception that is normalized in the contemporary social space (ibid., p. 166). In other words, Agamben argues that the logic of the camp is
extended beyond the concentration camp into the broader society, a society in which the state of exception and bare life become the norm. In this sense, concentration camps become the fundamental paradigm of biopolitical power.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben (2002) considers whether it is possible to bear witness to Auschwitz, arguing that survivors bore witness to something that was impossible to witness, because language was inadequate to express the shattering experience of the camp. This shattering experience constituted a silence between what was said and unsaid. The concentration camp was an unspeakable experience signifying the impossibility of bearing witness to the annihilation of life. However, for Agamben, witnessing involves not only becoming aware of the unspeakable experience and its consequences but also participating in the active process of transforming this experience by being vigilant or by acting on behalf of the victims. Bearing witness, then, implies taking responsibility to become a transformative agent of awareness and reception of others’ trauma. In particular, Agamben argues for a conception of ethics and biopolitics as bearing witness to the victimization and destruction of human life. Therefore, assuming the task of bearing witness in the name of those who cannot speak is essentially a task of bearing witness to the impossibility of witnessing.

Despite the critiques over Agamben’s use of the camp and bare life, suggesting that he makes several problematic assumptions about power and biopolitics, Jaworski (2012) suggests that it is important to pay attention to Agamben’s methodological approach, namely how he grounds theoretically the biopolitical constructs he uses such as bare life and the camp. At the heart of Agamben’s approach, points out Jaworski, is the idea of the paradigm. In *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, Agamben (2009) explains his methodological approach to biopolitics by arguing that he uses the term paradigm not to produce a universal theory of the camp. Rather, as Jaworski (2012) explains:

*[Agamben] uses the camp to trace its normative history precisely because concentration camps did not emerge from thin air. Rather, they emerged from a legal accommodation of the sovereign exception rather than random and accidental lawlessness. . . . In this sense, his approach to paradigm is methodological rather than methodical in so far as he uses the concept to unpack how the camp came into being, and why it was allowed to exist. For Agamben (2009), a paradigm is an example or an analogy used to explain the intelligibility of a phenomenon or historical event.*

(p. 355, added emphasis)

In other words, Agamben (2009) emphasizes that a paradigm cannot exist outside a specific historical context. Thus, traumatic events (e.g. the Holocaust) cannot be represented in essentialist terms or as ahistorical events that are above and beyond history and time, but rather as phenomena to be theorized and understood in historical and political terms. It is in this sense, argues Jaworski, that a paradigm represents a ‘research design’, namely, a methodological
approach to analyze the historical and political conditions that have led to traumatic events (2012, p. 356).

The use of the camp and bare life enables scholars and educators to theorize the notion of difficult knowledge as a process in which learners are called upon to become witnesses of unspeakable events in history. This sort of witnessing through must avoid any ahistorical notions of ethics and politics, precisely because learners neither stabilize the one who is witnessed within prescribed categories of knowledge nor assimilate him or her to where the learners come from. The constructs of the camp and bare life, therefore, may function as useful methodological ‘tools’ in that they draw attention to the fact that difficult knowledge constitutes an engagement with history that aims to interrupt all totalities and fixed categories about trauma, history, the self and the other. If we pay attention to what makes knowledge difficult in each historical context – that is, how the camp and bare life make witnessing a thorny and complicated experience – then perhaps we will be able to reconsider the ethics and politics of vulnerability (I expand on this idea in the next part of the chapter).

Most importantly, theorizing difficult knowledge through Agamben’s lens prevents a teleological and ‘happy ending’ account of redemption – that is, assumptions that traumatic affects and experiences can eventually be transcended. Thinking with Agamben’s methodology of the camp and paradigm to reconsider difficult knowledge as a form of witnessing tells us that there is no easy transcendence of difficult knowledge just as it is not easy to overcome traumatic affects and experiences. A major contribution of Agamben, then, is not to teach us that difficult knowledge ought to recover a history of traumatic experiences through merely ‘representing’ or ‘understanding’ the manifestations of traumatic events; rather, what is needed is to make these difficult affects and experiences for both primary and secondary witnesses the point of departure for a new level of ethical responsibility and political community.

Butler’s work on political vulnerability

In this part of the chapter, I draw upon the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2009) because she pushes us to rethink psychoanalytic paradigms and the challenge that psychic elements pose to the prospects of ethical and political transformation (and vice versa). Butler’s interest in political vulnerability in recent years makes a profound contribution to formulating a political and activist orientation for difficult knowledge (Zembylas, 2014). In particular, Butler’s work allows for the emergence of fruitful pedagogical openings that enable us to consider difficult knowledge from an action-oriented perspective without disavowing the psychical problematics embedded in this effort.

In Butler’s work following September 11, she is especially concerned with grief and how we are bounded emotionally to others in ways that interrupt our illusions of self-autonomy. As she writes in Precarious Life:
What grief displays is the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. . . . Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something . . . despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.

(2004, p. 23)

In this quote, Butler highlights how our affects, such as grief, show the strong entanglements between our psychic lives and the social and political consequences of those affects that often interrupt the self-centered stories we tell. Butler sketches a process of interruption that is very vivid and affectively powerful; the face, the scent, the touch and other feelings are all involved in the processes of social and political reproduction as well as in the prospects of transformation.

Butler is particularly preoccupied with hierarchies of public mourning, the distinction between grievable and less grievable lives (see also Butler, 2009), and the repudiation of grief in the very discourse that seeks to redress it, thus exposing how we are all confronted with what we cannot control: our own vulnerability. As she writes,

> each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies. . . . Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

(2004, p. 20)

Butler argues that “we cannot . . . will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it” (ibid., p. 29) and poses new questions about the relationship of grief, violence and vulnerability:

> Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek resolution for grief through violence? . . . If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? . . . To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.

(ibid., p. 30)
In her use of vulnerability, Butler is after a social and political theory that renarrates grief as a point of departure to do justice to the lives of others. Admittedly, her theory does not tell us precisely how we do this – as with much political theory – it just says we need to do it.

Importantly, precariousness, for Butler (2004), is about a “common human vulnerability” (p. 30); in other words, it is relational, thus it offers the basis for ethical responsiveness to others. In this manner, precarity is the gateway to nonviolent relationality and empathy; I oppose violence and injustice done to others, because I can empathize with them – because I realize that under other circumstances, violence and injustice could be aimed at me (Michel, 2016; Ruti, 2017; Millar, 2017). This is not to suggest, however, that Butler sees vulnerability as the same for everyone regardless of contextual or social distinctions (e.g. race, class, gender, etc.) that make some lives “more grievable” than others (2004, p. 30; see also Butler, 2009). Butler’s theorization of grief and mourning and especially her critique of the hierarchies of grief related to war on terror highlight how “certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable” (2004, p. xiv). Importantly, Butler acknowledges that we are not equally vulnerable and oppressed, but rather vulnerability is distributed unequally throughout the world. As Ruti (2017) explains, Butler does not only pay attention to the unequal distribution of precariousness, but also highlights how global structures of power often “make it difficult for us to acknowledge, let alone empathize, with the precariousness of those who do not inhabit our immediate, intimate lifeworld” (p. 97). In other words, as Butler observes, social and political norms prevent us from mourning the suffering (or death) of those who are deemed to be different from, or inferior to, ourselves.

In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler expands her theorization of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency and exposure, emphasizing the political implications. As she writes:

\[
\text{Hence, precariousness as a generalized condition relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by, a sustained and sustainable world; responsiveness – and thus, ultimately, responsibility – is located in the affective responses to a sustaining and impinging world.}
\]

(p. 34)

Here, Butler suggests that ‘frames of war’ establish “domains of the knowable” (p. 6) that “produce norms of recognizability” (ibid.). These norms, as she argues, operate at the level of social and political affect, as shown from the differential affective responses to the suffering of lives globally. Precariousness for Butler, then, is a social and political condition of being differentially exposed to others and their suffering. Therefore, the description of the world in terms of grievable and ungrievable lives is sustained through networks of social and political affect.
Butler’s approach is important methodologically because it creates openings for a political analysis of vulnerability and an ethical encounter with the other’s precariousness. As she explains, the frames of war act as a regulatory norm of social and political affect, exposing “precisely the rationale that supports a certain kind of war effort to distinguish between valuable and grievable lives on the one hand, and devalued and ungrievable lives on the other” (2009, p. 22). Therefore, she argues that we should “critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others” (2004, p. 30). The critical evaluation of the conditions of vulnerability is a way out of the dilemmas of identity in discussions of difficult knowledge, offering a point of departure for reconsidering ‘our’ and ‘their’ trauma. Inevitably though, given that there are socio-political norms and ways that discriminate between grievable lives, we might often be unable “to respond ethically to an unrecognizable other because they are unable to see the body before them or to hear its address” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 228, author’s emphasis).

A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method

So far, I have described Agamben’s and Butler’s approaches and how they can be employed methodologically to analyze the ethical, affective and political implications of traumatic legacies of the past. In the last part of this chapter, I will attempt to synthesize these approaches as methodologies to further explore the topic of difficult knowledge. The question that drives my analysis is: Does a fused theory of Agamben’s approach to the camp and bare life and Butler’s work on political vulnerability create spaces that can be pedagogically productive so that students and teachers who engage with difficult knowledge can critically recognize themselves as agents for ethical and political action? In other words, how can Agamben’s and Butler’s approaches be mobilized methodologically as tools that expand our critical engagement with difficult knowledge? As noted earlier, previous work on difficult knowledge has mainly used psychoanalytic tools to theorize this topic. Here I want to build on this work by drawing on the ideas outlined by a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method and consider the implications for enriching theorization of difficult knowledge.

Butler’s approach on political vulnerability resonates with Agamben’s theorization of the camp and bare life in that ontological vulnerability is seen a process of materializing and differentiating meaning, effect and affect, depending on social norms that render meaning, effect and affect intelligible within each historical context (Jaworski, 2012, p. 359). Butler’s view that “the critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself” (2009, p. 51, original emphasis) urges us, as educators, to consider more seriously the challenges of knowing certain lives in their precariousness. As she asks: “What allows a life to become visible in its precariousness
and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?” (ibid.). Similarly, Agamben’s theory of the camp and bare life draws attention to the historical conditions that make a life to become bare life beyond fixed (e.g. national) categories. Both Agamben’s and Butler’s politically oriented work offers us a critical analysis of vulnerability and how it can inspire an action-oriented solidarity in engagements with difficult knowledge.

Vulnerability is understood as openness to an encounter with the Other, which provides the point of departure for ethical transformation. Tinning (2018), for example, argues that displaying Difficult Matters in museums – namely, issues that are violent, tragic, traumatic and painful and, therefore, are difficult to deal with such as war, genocide and human rights violations – involves a critical consideration of the norms of vulnerability at play in particular situations. Her analysis acknowledges the ethical and pedagogical challenges and possibilities in such teaching-learning relations – for example how museum professionals may involve visitors as vulnerable beings in order to encourage ethical transformation. With the help of Butler and Agamben, this pedagogical framework can create valuable openings to explore the complexities of personal and collective stories of vulnerability as well as the possibilities of ethical and political transformations in different situations in which difficult knowledge is engaged (e.g. museums, schools, public spaces).

Butler’s concepts of grief and loss as mutual vulnerability and Agamben’s analysis of the camp to bear witness to the impossible offer us the tools to rethink collective responsibility for each others’ life. For example, as Taylor (2011) points out, using Butler’s theory to analyze how certain affects are socially and politically normalized “can lead to particular solutions that seek to disrupt circuits of indifference” (p. 18). I would also argue that Agamben’s theory of biopower questions the very notions of humanity beyond concentration camps which make possible the generalization of the logic of the camp. A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability, then, seems to suggest a pedagogy of difficult knowledge that not only challenges established norms of recognition that underpin our habits of whom to grieve or not, but also creates new ‘meanings’ about others and, therefore, new forms of ethical sociality and political relationality with them (Zembylas, 2017, 2018). Such pedagogy implies that “in order to know differently we have to feel differently” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 150); that is, knowing and feeling differently are strongly interrelated.

Applications to socially just teacher education

This dynamic theorization of difficult knowledge – that is, one which takes into consideration issues of trauma, subjectivity, vulnerability, inclusion/exclusion and affect, to name a few fundamental constructs involved – has important pedagogical and curricular implications. For example, a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method can be applied
teachers finding it difficult to discuss issues of race and homophobia or teachers’ emotional reactions to engaging in politically different ideologies. A theoretical method that wishes to develop self-criticality, ethical responsibility and the prospects of political transformation in engaging with difficult issues needs to create conditions for teachers so that their affective investments are strategically engaged. By showing empathy to teachers’ emotional reactions in engaging with difficult issues, the conditions are created step by step to address these issues while recognizing the complexities of personal and collective stories of vulnerability, regardless of where they are coming from.

Needless to say, empathy can easily become ‘empty’ when it remains at a superficial level by removing emotion from the call to action and by framing the conversation in terms of simplistic and essentialist moral categories such as that of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ or ‘friend’ versus ‘enemy’ (Chouliaraki, 2008). Empty empathy resorts to a sentimental discourse of trauma and vulnerability that evokes pity for the other-sufferers rather than compassionate action, leading learners to voyeurism and passivity (Zembylas, 2013, 2017). Attention to shared vulnerability, then, is not enough, if as (teacher) educators we wish to invent pedagogies of difficult knowledge that inspire protest at injustice or transmute into compassionate action that ‘radicalizes’ solidarity. Radicalization of solidarity requires that participants of a learning experience (e.g. teachers, students) recognize their shared complicities too, that is, the capacity to injure others and bear responsibility for others’ vulnerability.

In other words, an argument of shared vulnerability is not completely unproblematic, if it fails to recognize shared complicities (Zembylas, 2014, 2018). A focus on both shared vulnerabilities and shared complicities acknowledges that there are asymmetries of trauma, responsibility and injustice – just as Agamben’s and Butler’s attention to bare life and vulnerability teaches us. A discourse of shared vulnerabilities and shared complicities neither eschews questions of material suffering nor obscures issues of responsibility and injustice; on the contrary, it highlights both the symmetries and the asymmetries of vulnerability and complicity. That is, although the experience of vulnerability may be more or less universal, the discourse of vulnerability raises important critical questions such as “Vulnerable to whom? In what terms? Whose responsibility is it? What can be done to change this?” in order to dismiss the possibility of sliding into a sentimental recognition of potential ‘sameness’ (Zembylas, 2013). Without this double realization – that is, we are all vulnerable but not in the same manner and that we have shared (yet asymmetrical) complicities in others’ suffering and trauma – our understanding of difficult knowledge will fail to realize its potential for affective solidarity and transformation.

All in all, a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method highlights two important insights that function methodologically to enrich our theorization of difficult knowledge: first, while acknowledging the universality of bare life and vulnerability, we should not lose sight of their particularity; second, bare life and vulnerability need to be historicized rather
than psychologized so that we can evaluate the link between vulnerability and oppression or social injustice. That is, it is important that efforts to ‘translate’ ethics and politics of difficult knowledge into a pedagogical proposition are accompanied by a reformulation and recontextualization of the meaning(s) of the constructs involved (e.g. bare life, vulnerability), which as I argued, with the help of Agamben and Butler, can offer more productive pedagogical engagement with difficult knowledge.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have suggested that a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability could function as a theoretical method to explore difficult knowledge. As Jaworski (2012) has suggested, “It is important to think with theoretical thinkers . . . thinking through their ideas rather than about them” (p. 361, original emphasis). Thinking through Agamben’s ideas of the camp and bare life highlights the importance of studying the historical and political conditions and trajectories of such ideas; this is crucial to using these ideas to reconfigure difficult knowledge in different settings in education and beyond. Similarly, thinking through Butler’s ideas of political vulnerability emphasizes that it is important to pay attention to the complexities and tensions involved within the contexts in which traumatic experiences emerge, as there are no universal theoretical approaches about political vulnerability. A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability as a theoretical method, then, has important implications on producing more theoretical research for the field of education that other traditional methods cannot.

In particular, a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability makes possible the theorization of what and how difficult knowledge is constituted within each context – just as what constitutes bare life or vulnerability – while taking into consideration the contextual social and political norms. Theorizing difficult knowledge in light of a fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability enables us to see that traumatic experiences (e.g. genocides, racisms, wars and conflicts) require a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of the emotional burden carried by teachers’ and learners’ affective investments to particular ideologies (e.g. racism, nationalism), especially when the desire for empowerment and humanization seems to be rejected or eroded.

An ongoing challenge for educational researchers is how to find new methodological and theoretical ways of exploring difficult knowledge as points of departure to create openings for ethical and political transformation. I view this challenge as a persistent struggle for inventing new ways of considering how certain theories work to advance our methodologies of identifying and handling difficult knowledge with care, sensitivity and criticality. A fused theory of biopower and political vulnerability is just one of those ways; there are numerous others that might enable scholars and educators to think differently about topics such as difficult knowledge and invent productive pedagogical engagement with them.
References


