In recent years, the world has undoubtedly been witnessing the spread of resistance into a mainstream phenomenon, instead of being a domain of marginalized and largely left-leaning minorities. Starting with the Arab Spring in 2010, the 2013 Gezi Park Protests in Turkey brought a diverse range of newcomers to a scene of resistance. The most unlikely alliances were made between these diverse groups, as they also had the chance to closely witness and protect each other’s vulnerabilities during these instances of solidarity. In the light of familiar and unfamiliar sights of resistance that unfolded in the last decade, the feminist perspective on social change also had to be reconsidered in a way to expand its analytical borders. The “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance: Feminism and Social Change” workshop that took place two months after the Gezi uprising at Columbia University’s Global Center in Istanbul, came as a result of this need. Three years after the workshop, the book Vulnerability in Resistance edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay was published, becoming even more timely as resistance turned into a day-to-day reality for a much larger number of people.

The main purpose of the book is to challenge the idea that vulnerability and resistance are opposite of each other and mutually exclusive. It aims to look beyond the two opposing alternatives of paternalism and victimization that overshadow political agency of “vulnerable populations,” especially women and minorities. In “rethinking the subject of political agency,” the editors invite the readers to think about the possibility of conceiving of “resistance as drawing from vulnerability, as a resource of vulnerability, or as part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself” (p. 1). As seen in the example of street protests where people expose their bodies to a very likely physical harm by the security forces, vulnerability itself may become the means of resistance, and by way of embracing their vulnerability street protestors seek to claim their agency instead of escaping it. In fact, Judith Butler (“Rethinking Vulnerability”) establishes the basic understanding that there is no one-dimensional performativity that is solely comprised of acting: “we are invariably acted on and acting, and this is one reason performativity cannot be reduced to the idea of free, individual performance” (p. 24).

Thinking about the interpenetration of resistance and vulnerability, one definitely needs to expand the definitions of these two terms, as the Introduction chapter attempts to do. First of all, it claims that despite the tendency to associate resistance with “prevailing ideas of agency and mastery” and thus seeing
the disavowal of vulnerability as a strategy of resistance, vulnerability is also constructed as a means of achieving power and made into a part of a resistance strategy. As in the case of men complaining about feminism’s threatening their rights, or the white people complaining about blacks and immigrants threatening their security, “the ‘recourse’ to vulnerability … can become the basis for a policy that seeks to exclude or contain women and minorities” (p. 4). Hence, there is no single way of understanding vulnerability as belonging to victims or those with less power, and invulnerability belonging to the agents, masters, and the powerful ones; instead, they “ought to be understood as relational and social” as well as “politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power” (p. 5). This way of analysis presents a new framework beyond the human rights discourse which draws a concrete line between “vulnerable populations,” whose modes of collective resistance are devalued and foreclosed, and the invulnerable ones, who have the privilege of political agency to take care of them (p. 6).

The analysis of the Gezi protests by Zeynep Gambetti (“Risking Oneself”) illustrate how vulnerability in the form of otherness created instantaneous solidarity between socially—distanced group identities and turned Gezi Park into ‘a radically ethical site … a micro-polis producing singularities even as bodies went about accomplishing everyday chores of sustenance’ (p. 47). Başak Ertür’s chapter (“Barricades”) on the other hand, turns a critical eye towards the ‘monumentalization of resistance’ in Gezi Protests, by disavowing vulnerability ‘through mythologies of virility, fantasies of impermeability, iconographies of heroes/martyrs, or consolations of monumentalized failure’ (p. 116). Sarah Bracke (“Bouncing Back”) also offers a critique of disavowing vulnerability in the neoliberal ‘ethos of resilience’ that defers the question of social transformation while putting the emphasis on the individual’s perception of that unchanging condition of vulnerability (pp. 69–70). Another criticism of this liberal conception of political agency is a call by Elena Loizidou (“Dreams”) to include non-material forms of performances, such as dreams and dreaming as part of being a political subject (p. 136), and Athena Athanasiou (“Non-sovereign Agonism”) to explore ‘ways in which vulnerability might work to open the space for a nonsovereign vision of political subjectivity’ as an ‘alternative to the apparatuses of the self-contained, self-regulating moral subject’ that tends to see political agency in the absence of vulnerability (p. 271).

The chapters in this volume, overall, aim to fulfill “the task of political thinking” within this new framework “that does not oppose vulnerability to resistance” by addressing the different challenges posed by “questions of self-determination, hegemony, mourning, violence, memory, occupation, public demonstrations, representation, the visual field and the visual arts, or
freedom” (p. 7). This new framework is applied to women’s issues, such as ‘Violence Against Women in Turkey’ by Meltem Ahiska in order to show how the monumentalization of horror in the gigantic number of femicide victims prevents us from actually mourning for them. Despite the efforts of women’s organizations to make these women known and remembered with their campaign against femicides, they do not allow an understanding of ‘the singularity and complexity of their desire ... what is lost for them, and what we have lost by their death’ since ‘we are desensitized and petrified by the monumentalized horror’ (p. 228). This question of singularity of the vulnerable bodies is also brought up within the context of the Palestinian resistance through a feminist artist’s perspective by Elena Tzelepis (“Vulnerable Corporealities”), as she claims that the feminist artwork of Mona Hatoum expands and complicates ‘the political vocabulary of resistance by dismantling the stereotypical image of the helpless female body’ (p. 164). Nükhet Sirman’s chapter on the Kurdish political movement (“When Antigone is a Man”) contributes to this argument by illustrating how vulnerability leads to openness and room for change in a resistance movement (p. 205), Elsa Dorlin (“Bare Subjectivity”) offers a new perspective on the face veil (niqab) as a performance of going anonymous in a way to show the ‘contours of an immediate history of new modalities of subjection’ (p. 238). Rema Hammami (“Precarious Politics”), on the other hand, highlights the act of counter-visibility of the Jewish and Euro-American bodies as a strategy of the Palestinian resistance ‘in the face of the erasure and isolation deployed by Israeli colonial violence’ in the Jewish settlements (p. 168).

What a politically engaged scholar can get from this book is hinted by Marianne Hirsch (“Vulnerable Times”) when she invites her peers ‘to read, to look, and to listen openly and vulnerably’ (p. 93) and face the vulnerability of and in resistance, which is more concerned ‘with the ceaseless mobilization of permeable alliances that may question its own limits’ rather than ‘with the realization of an ultimate ideal’ as Leticia Sabsay (“Permeable Bodies”) concludes (p. 297). In the end, the book successfully provokes further thought in thinking and writing about vulnerability and resistance. Whereas, one can say that this feminist framework is yet to be implemented in the areas where vulnerability and resistance are usually overlooked by left-leaning scholarly activism, including but not limited to right-wing, nationalist, religious, mainstream, and majority groups.

Semiha Topal
Ph.D., Visiting Faculty, School of Historical Philosophical and Religious Studies,
Arizona State University
stopal@asu.edu