

The Inequality of Human Lives

About : Didier Fassin, *La vie. Mode d'emploi critique*, Seuil

By Perig Pitrou

Between naturalism and humanism, midway between Perec and Adorno, Didier Fassin suggests considering human lives in terms of the evaluation variable accorded to them by the social environment. Thus, compassionate morality is replaced by the demand for justice.

Life is an old problem, redefined in contemporary philosophy by authors such as Arendt, Canguilhem, Foucault and Agamben, as well as by anthropology, which examines this issue using various methodologies. In his introduction, Didier Fassin outlines this epistemological configuration marked by the tension between two understandings of life, seen either as a biological phenomenon, with humans incorporated “into a vast community of living beings” or as a biographical phenomenon, with humans seen as “exceptional living beings by virtue of their capacity for consciousness and language”¹.

Whereas ancient and classical philosophers (Aristotle, Leibniz, Descartes, Kant) address these dimensions through a common framework, a dichotomous approach seems to have prevailed since the 19th century, particularly in the social sciences. Works in Science & Technology Studies examine the “living”, whereas others focus on human existences as they are lived. Works like *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* by J. Biehl or *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl* by A. Petryna² do attempt to combine these two approaches, which the author describes as “naturalist” and “humanist”, but there is still much to be done to develop a methodology that can help us comprehend a phenomenon at the interface of the natural and the social.

¹ All quotes translated by Tiam Goudarzi. Slight differences (indicated in brackets) may appear with the English version of the book, *Life: a Critical User's Manual*, Wiley, 2018.

² João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, Berkeley: University of California Press, (2013 [2005]). Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, (2013 [2002]).

D. Fassin maintains that empirical research is irreplaceable for exploring the concrete contexts (political, economic or social) in which humans live their lives. By placing himself under the auspices of Adorno and Percec, this anthropologist (who initially trained in medicine) develops his theory based on field surveys that he conducted in South Africa and France among populations of “forced nomads”: a general term referring to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The reference to Percec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*³ establishes a connection with the Percecian project of constructing a work like a puzzle: a way of capturing reality in which each piece enlightens us about a detail, the meaning of which depends on the whole to which it contributes. Similarly, the aim of the cases studied by D. Fassin is to achieve a rise in generality, particularly through dialogue with philosophers. The subtitle “A Critical User’s Manual” pays tribute to the Frankfurt School, especially to Adorno’s *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*⁴. D. Fassin positions himself in relation to this book by proposing to formulate a “critique of [...] those vulnerable and precarious lives to which many human beings are reduced”. Independent of the circumstances—the book brings together the “Adorno Lectures” given in Frankfurt—the critical dimension of the German school of thought is at the heart of a work that seeks to expose the political and intellectual scandal of the inequality of human lives, which leads to the most devalued suffering greater exclusion and alienation than others. The author suggests explaining this phenomenon by reformulating our questions about human existence:

“My question is not: how are we living? Or, how should we live? But rather: what value do we attach to human life as an abstract concept? And how do we evaluate human lives as concrete realities? Any discrepancy or any contradiction between the evaluation of life in general and the devaluing of certain lives in particular then becomes indicative of [tensions in the] moral economy of life in contemporary societies”.

The approach is original in that it establishes how this “moral economy of life” governs individual and collective actions. Emphasising the complementarity between the philosophical and anthropological options, without attempting to choose between them, the reasoning unfolds around three key concepts: “forms of life”, “ethics of life” and “politics of life”. These serve as empirical keys (“Each of these opens up an anthropological fact of life”). The conclusion of this reasoning is that

“the actual evaluation of lives contradicts the abstract valuation of life since one puts different monetary value on human existences depending on social categories, and since one considers that some deserve to live more than others”.

³ Georges Percec, *La vie mode d'emploi. Romans*, Paris, Hachette, 1978 (published in English as *Life: A User’s Manual*).

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London, Verso, 1974.

Forced nomadism as a form of life

At the crossroads of anthropology and philosophy, the notion of “forms of life” demarcates an epistemic space that is fundamental for contemporary thought (Ferrarese & Laugier 2018⁵) and is marked by the dichotomy mentioned above. According to Wittgenstein’s interpretation and, more widely, anthropological options, these forms can be considered from a naturalist or a humanist perspective, depending on whether we think that they define a universal human condition or specific cultural contexts. The rereading of Canguilhem and Agamben complicates this dichotomy, revealing a triple tension in the notion of a form of life: universal/particular; biological/biographical; law/practice. To give an example, the author proposes an investigation of a “form of life haunting the collective imagination of contemporary societies, that of transnational precarious nomads—refugees or migrants, asylum seekers or undocumented foreigners”.

The study of young Syrian refugees in the Calais Jungle or Zimbabwean immigrant women in South Africa proves that in spite of their differences, these people “share a common form of life: It is the form of life of wandering strangers who have left the country of their citizenship...”. Although from a formal perspective, various legal statuses can be identified (asylum seekers, migrants, undocumented foreigners), the statements collected highlight shared traits that sketch out the contours of vulnerable (Lovell *et al.* 2013)⁶ and precarious lives (Butler 2004)⁷. These people have experiences in common: persecution and poverty in their home countries, bureaucratic malfunctions, corruption and violence in host countries. Their life stories express how daily worry about the survival of the biological body is combined with unusual ways of making a society, both within nomadic groups and in the relationships formed with host societies.

The ethics of life and the valuation of life as the supreme good

The same method for redefining a concept by testing it against empirical cases is used to reflect on the ethical question. Rather than asking what makes a good life, the author asks about “the way life has become the supreme good in contemporary societies”. To avoid getting trapped in the antagonism between the anthropology of moral systems and the anthropology of ethical subjects, he suggests a concrete examination of “moral questions and

⁵ Estelle Ferrarese, Sandra Laugier (eds.), *Formes de vie*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 2018.

⁶ Anne M. Lovell, Stefania Pandolfo, Veena Das, Sandra Laugier, *Face aux désastres. Une conversation à quatre voix sur la folie, le care et les grandes détresses collectives*, Paris, Éditions d’Ithaque, 2013.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York, Verso, 2004.

ethical stakes”, as well turning from a reflection on “ethical life” to a reflection on the “ethics of life”, i.e. the historical and socio-political dynamics involved in the evaluation of human lives. The contrastive analysis of the regularization of foreigners suffering illness in France and the treatment of AIDS sufferers in South Africa reveals a tension between “two aspects, one social and political, the other physical and biological, the latter tending today to prevail more and more often over the former”. In France, in the space of a few decades, the rate of recognition for the refugee status has dropped from 90% to 10%, whereas the number of people regularized due to the “humanitarian rationale” has considerably increased (to 8000 people in 2005). This indicates that “a shift has [...] occurred in the ethics of life. The value of life as a social and political phenomenon has declined, while its value as a natural and biological one has progressed”. In South Africa, the dramatic situation of the AIDS epidemic and the difficulty of providing treatment for the whole population bring two ethics into conflict: that of activists and doctors asserting that “each life counts”, and that of the people in charge of public health who, in their effort to construct an effective medical system, put the common good before individual benefits: “The ultimate imperative was, for some, the affirmation of the value of each life and, for others, the defence of the equality of all lives”. The choice to provide medication for everyone despite the overall system being unable to effectively monitor treatment proves that the first option won.

This highlights a characteristic of the contemporary world: “biolegitimacy”, i.e. “the recognition of life as a supreme good in the name of which any action can ultimately be justified”. To better reveal the mechanisms at work here, D. Fassin juxtaposes humanitarian action, which strives to save lives at any cost, and the act of sacrificing one’s life for a cause, which he examines through the practices of martyrs in Palestine. For example, the works of Talal Asad and Banu Bargu explain how life (that is, the possibility of taking one’s own life) can in some cases become a weapon⁸. The chapter concludes by identifying the mutations that occur in today’s societies:

“biological citizenship tends to affect the significance of social rights [...] the rise in the recognition of physical life is frequently accompanied by a decline in the import of political life, [...] the legitimacy of humanitarian emergency diminishes the power of the call for social justice, [...] the self-evident justification of saving lives renders unthinkable the meaning of sacrificing one’s life for a cause”.

⁸ Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, New York, Colombia University Press, 2007. Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate. The Politics of Human Weapons*, New York, Colombia University Press, 2014.

Politics of life and the unequal treatment of human lives

The aim in the final chapter is to examine the disparities, or even the tensions, between the values defended by the new ethics of life and the concrete evaluation of human lives in “politics of life”. This expression aims to set itself apart from the approaches descended from biopolitics, a Foucauldian notion that D. Fassin criticises for focusing more on techniques for the government of populations than on the concrete exercise of political power over human lives. The aim, then, is to establish the more or less explicit criteria that organise, at society level, the systems in which inequality becomes acceptable or even normal.

A genealogical explanation shows how the value of lives has come to be quantified, and a very convincing analysis is devoted to the price of life and the establishment of systems of equivalence between human existence and monetary values in the insurance industry or in the institutions that allocate compensation to various categories of victims. Meanwhile, the ethnographic approach reveals the moral hierarchies at work in the evaluation of human lives. There are some very interesting pages on social death and life expectancy. They explain that the treatment of particular lives always involves a wider economic and political organisation. Symmetrically, the reading of statistics should always allow us to understand the suffering of certain populations who are treated unequally. The fate of the Afro-American population in the United States is a dramatic example of this.

An anthropology of life: an impossible project?

In conclusion, D. Fassin reaffirms his desire to write a “critical user’s manual” capable of guiding action:

“Considering life through the lens of inequality thus makes the social world intelligible anew, but also offers new possibilities for intervention. It enables us to move from expressing compassion to recognizing injustice”.

On the theoretical level, his book is a crucial contribution to the domain of anthropology of life, in which D. Fassin is an important figure, even though he employs very negative terms to describe such a comparative exercise, which he deems both “improbable” and “doomed to failure”⁹, considering it to be “an impossible project”. Yet his works demonstrate the pertinence of the investigations establishing links between the ways in which humans view life (theirs and that of non-humans) and social, historical and political contexts.

⁹ “A totalizing approach aimed at constituting an anthropology of life thus seems doomed to failure, or at least to abandoning what we might call the humanity of life – the social, historical, political, and moral dimensions of human lives as they emerge from both living matter and lived existence.”

As part of this exploration, it seems perfectly legitimate, without slipping into culturalism, to compare the understandings of life that prevail in very distinct societies, both western and non-western, traditional and non-traditional. We can of course agree with the author about the insufficiency, in anthropology of life, of phenomenologically inspired (T. Ingold) and semiologically inspired (E. Kohn) projects that do not rigorously establish the connections between theories of life and social contexts¹⁰. However, the ethnological research that seeks to link theories of life with socio-technical and political organisations is so rich that I personally consider it entirely legitimate to embark on a project for a *social anthropology of life* with a comparative vocation.¹¹

In the dialogue that we ought to establish between Science & Technology Studies and work on forms of life or politics of life, it is important to consider investigations carried out in traditional societies. Such an approach offers two benefits. First, it teaches us how the empirical realities covered by the concepts of forms of life, ethics of life and politics of life are seen outside of the West, within very distinct social organisations. This leads to a reflection on how a phenomenon as complex as life is understood based on non-western concepts. Second, in a more dynamic and historical perspective, comparing the wide range of theories of life and socio-political contexts helps us understand that forced nomads are not just unfairly treated lives: they are people who experience, in their flesh, various ways of seeing their singular lives in the plurality of social organisations where they learn to live.

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¹⁰ Perig Pitrou, “La vie, un objet pour l’anthropologie ? Options méthodologiques et problèmes épistémologiques”, *L’Homme*, vol. 212, n° 4, 2014, p. 159-189.

¹¹ Perig Pitrou, “La voie des techniques. La découverte des théories de la vie chez les Achuar”, in *Au seuil de la forêt. Hommage à Philippe Descola, l’anthropologue de la nature*.