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1. Vulnerability is everywhere

How can we understand vulnerability? Over the past twenty years, the social sciences and philosophy have produced countless works that have collectively created a turn in our understanding of both individual and social forms of life by placing the concept of vulnerability at the center of their thinking. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, vulnerability is everywhere these days. What meaning should we attach to it? What archaeology of discourse and of practice can help us understand its astonishingly rapid emergence and spread? Is it possible that we have suddenly become more vulnerable? Or is it not rather the case that we have adopted a different ontology, so that we now expect an understanding of fragility to inform the way we perceive and recognize life? Or could it perhaps be a clear indication that current forms of governing human lives are now concerned with managing the forms of suffering that traditionally remained beyond the reach of politics?

Judith Butler's text "Bodies That Still Matter"[1] formulates a set of answers to the above questions that I would like to use as a springboard for an examination of the concept of vulnerability. In her previous work *Bodies That Matter*, she had insisted on the materiality of bodies, in spite of her adversaries who accused her of producing an entirely discursive body. In this text, she inflects her position, by introducing the idea of vulnerability at the heart of the materiality of bodies. Thus, she is able to unfold a radical conception of bodies and their actions.

The idea of the vulnerability of lives cannot, however, be invoked as a mantra to ward off the traditional concept of individualism whereby the individual is a substance or an identity apart. It is precisely in order to counter any idea of a self apart that Butler puts forward the argument of vulnerability. Drawing on the etymology of vulnerability as exposure to injury (*vulnus*), Butler has previously emphasized how much our lives

1 - Judith Butler, 'Bodies That Still Matter', *Raisons politiques* 76, *Judith Butler: Politiques du sensible*, November 2019, available at www.cairn.info (Judith Butler, 'Ces corps qui comptent encore', trans. Myriam Dennehy, *Raisons politiques*, 76, November 2019, pp. 15-25).

depend on other lives that it is in their power to injure, sometimes fatally.[2] We must therefore pay attention to the interrelational, social, and economic conditions that make and break lives, that support or invalidate them, secure them, or make them precarious. The discourse of vulnerability encompasses the whole set of conditions that force us to think of life as always being lived under conditions. And it is no exaggeration to say that, in her own way, and without being the first to do so, Butler is expressing a way of thinking about life under conditions that breaks away from philosophy's tendency to consider a living being free from conditions.

The risk, however, of this "vulnerability turn" is precisely that of substituting a general discourse on the vulnerability of all lives, as a shared human condition, for a discourse on the living being. It is precisely to counter this risk that Butler strives to differentiate levels of vulnerability. To this end, she has created a distinction between the notions of precarity and precariousness.[3] When reading the text that opens this issue of *Raisons politiques*, it is important to keep in mind that "vulnerability" has three meanings. Firstly, vulnerability refers to a general dimension of human lives that have been removed from their historical contingencies: the risk in this case is of obscuring the historical conditions of the emergence of vulnerability as well as the forms of resistance to which it gives rise, in keeping with Foucault's belief that "where there is power, there is resistance."[4] The second meaning of vulnerability, partially contradicting the first, refers to specific ways of perceiving groups considered to be more fragile because of the conditions imposed on them. Vulnerability is the result of a process of identifying populations who, once designated as such, can benefit from appropriate protection and care. The risk of such an identification process is that we create a vulnerable group and, in so doing, deprive them in advance of any capacity to act in their own name or, more exactly, by their own means. In its third meaning, vulnerability relates to an exposure to extreme forms of domination, in other words class domination, but also gendered domination (as evidenced by the phenomenon of feminicide), and racial domination, with the extreme fragilization of outcasts in particular. The characteristic of this vulnerability, engendered by domination including any violent ordeal that carries a threat of death, is that it gives rise to a kind of psychological terror in individuals exposed to domination and who see themselves as such; these individuals, even if they are not directly attacked, are plunged into a state of generalized or undefined anxiety about their own survival.

It is clear that relating to vulnerability is far from a simple matter. The very designation of vulnerability may prove fatal or violent by depriving those designated as vulnerable of any real power. Although often without developing the point, Butler stigmatizes what she calls the shortcomings of a paternalistic state that combines care and support, looking after people rather than enabling them

2 - See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2006) and Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

3 - Butler, *Frames of War,* 25.

4 - Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998). 95

to look after themselves. At this point, a number of questions inevitably arise concerning the role of the state in relation to understandings of vulnerability and the struggle to counter it. According to Butler, from a biopolitical virilist perspective, the state is constantly presented as the father of the family, cautious to protect his children. Yet we might question the precise status of this criticism of the state, particularly since the state, in our contemporary neoliberal context, has itself been made fragile or indeed vulnerable by a long series of deregulatory measures that typically break down our institutions of social protection and dismantle any sense of autonomy in the world of care by reducing it to a set of market imperatives.

Rather than heading down that avenue, which would mean engaging in a reflection on the relationship between state control of power, neoliberalism, and vulnerability, Butler focuses on defining vulnerability in the context of the state of grievance to which it gives rise; following this regressive approach, and using the example of the migrants crossing the Mediterranean, she returns once again to the power of lamenting lives and to our own ability/inability to use this power in some way. The recognition of vulnerability and loss opens up the discursive space of grievance and lament just as it opens up the right to visibility for bodies that expose themselves in order to denounce the conditions of survival in which they are placed [5]; this act of exposure is indeed the ultimate characteristic of bodies that continue to count, whereas many bodies are considered to be surplus, disposable, quite simply supernumerary, or useless.

Nevertheless, has all ambiguity about vulnerability really disappeared? The question arises as to who voices the grievances of the vulnerable. The vulnerable themselves? How do they recognize that they themselves are linked to a social situation that demands our critical gaze? And above all, is it not the case that their own judgment is always, almost by definition, overridden by other, more authorized external judgments? Clearly, the question is indeed that of the relationship between perceptions of forms of vulnerability and critical judgment on vulnerability. In other words, how is it possible to arrive at a critique of vulnerability that does not lead to the designation-identification of the vulnerable as a group apart? How can we avoid validating a sociology of the vulnerable while preserving a critique in our description of the forms of vulnerability?

2. From "misérable" to "vulnérable"

In order to answer these questions, we must first take a look at the historical emergence of the vocabulary of vulnerability and locate it within the long history of ways of designating the dominated. We should take time to reflect on the significant difference between the appearance and use of the French words "misérable" (destitute) in the nineteenth century and "vulnérable" (vulnerable) in the twentieth century. The term "les misérables" was simultaneously a descriptive

5 - See Judith Butler, "We the people: Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly" in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015.

and political category: it encompassed both a clinical state and a critique. "The invention of the social"[6] had been promoted by a certain unification of collective life around the Third Republic's active principle of solidarity or cooperation and also as a result of the major social issue of the inequalities that risked compromising the social plane. The "social" then was organized and unified around an underlying guiding principle that was effectively the "medicine" that should cure the political body. This was truly a "principle that acts to correct the failings of society and the damage inflicted on individuals."[7] The "misérable," then, is on the one hand a destitute individual who is cut off from their full human potential through exploitation or marginalization, and on the other hand a critical category that simultaneously encompasses both the pathology of social life and the positive principle of justice that is jeopardized in each impoverished individual's life. The power of social criticism was thus to be able to make the connection between the real singularity of a life and the universality of a principle that had been pathologically threatened. This means that, potentially, destitute people carry within themselves the experience of all destitute people and that, through a mirror effect, each one can see themself in the image of any other.

This brings us to Victor Hugo's 1862 preface to *Les Misérables*. He describes the "social condemnation"[8] that destroys the social contract by hurling some people's lives into the depths of hell. The preface refers to "la misère" as a state of destitution, created by the degradation of man by poverty, of woman by hunger, and of children by a lack of daylight.[9] He insists that this destitution is a fall that has been created by the state of society. It compels the fallen to continue living a life that is in reality a social death. In Hugo's terms, this fall is intensified metonymically or spatially by the social margins (horizontal distancing) and by the darkness of the sewers (vertical distancing), and temporally by the night (periodic distancing); this description of the fall is marked by the fact that it is society that causes the fall. Society is the agent of production of destitution, and so has the responsibility to eliminate it.

This is exactly what Hugo had already established in his speech to the French Revolutionary Legislative Assembly of July 8, 1849: "I am not among those who believe that suffering can be eliminated in this world; suffering is a divine law; but I am among those who believe and maintain that we can destroy destitution."[10] The distinction between suffering and destitution ("la misère") is important. Suffering is cosmological and metaphysical, and cannot be eliminated, while destitution is social. A geography of destitution (the suburbs, the outskirts, the insanitary houses) can be associated with a sociology of the destitute (housing, hunger). Destitution is translated into the language of reality

6 - Jacques Donzelot, *L'invention du social. Essai sur le déclin des passions politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 225. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

7 - Donzelot, *L'invention du social,* 225.

8 - Victor Hugo, "Preface," *Les Miserables* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1862).

9 - Ibid.

10 - André Daniel Tolédano, ed., *Victor Hugo* (Monaco: Hemera, 1950), 91.

and this reality must not become a norm: "I say that these are things that should not be." [11] Hugo's speech to the Assembly was intended to support a proposal by Armand de Melun (a candidate for the political right in the 1849 elections) to set up a committee to "work on laws relating to welfare provision and public assistance." [12] There was an urgent emphasis not only on the need for labor laws, but equally on the formulation of a right to social welfare for persons deprived of work. [13] The public authorities must fight destitution by facilitating access to work and making unemployment bearable. Welfare must not be a contingent and private matter, distributed only by those whose moral or religious leanings made them passionately concerned for "their" poor yet indifferent to others. Welfare must be a public institution to help the destitute rather than a haughty or benevolent form of handouts to the wretched.

Hugo thus challenges the idea that there are two forms of poverty, linked to two ways of being poor, one good and one bad. His aim is to find a definition of the social question that articulates a "great Christian code of prevention and public assistance" [14]; moreover, according to Hugo in the Note to his speech on poverty on July 8, 1849, this code must relate to a "unique understanding" [15] of the social, which combines labor rights and welfare. Significantly, this understanding is based on the distinction between suffering and destitution. Suffering is private and cannot be eliminated. Destitution is social and must be destroyed. Destitution is, in fact, a public form of suffering, a contradiction in terms that must be suppressed: "Misery [destitution] is a disease of the social body as leprosy is a disease of the human body. Misery can disappear as leprosy disappeared." [16]

Hugo's definition of destitution introduced a new way of approaching the social question, whereby it is fundamental that social support becomes a new right. Taken literally, this argument is anti-liberal in that, according to liberals, for social support to be an important social mechanism, it can never be instituted by law since that would promote idleness, meaning that support turns into state handout. Adolphe Thiers' 1851 report on welfare provision and benefits serves as a reminder of the liberal doctrine: "It is important that charity . . . remains voluntary . . . , because otherwise it would cease to be a virtue and become a constraint." [17] The revolutionaries' desire to introduce charity as a legal right was not fulfilled and, ultimately, the views of liberalism triumphed and "condemn[ed]

11 - Armin Burkhardt, ed., *Handbuch Politische Rhetorik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019), 987.

12 - *Compte rendu des séances: Exposés de motifs et projets de lois présentés par le gouvernement Volumes 1–17* (Paris: Imprimerie de l'Assemblée nationale, 1852) 261.

13 - See Pascal Melka, *Victor Hugo. Un combat pour les opprimés. Étude de son évolution politique* (Paris: La compagnie littéraire, 2008).

14 - Louise Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie Rendu* (Chicago: DePaul University, 2006), 234.

15 - Victor Hugo, *Actes et paroles (Les 4 volumes): Nouvelle édition augmentée* (Paris: Arvensa editions, 2014), 378.

16 - Raymond Escholier, *Victor Hugo* (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1930) 282.

17 - Quoted in Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 375.

the very idea of the legal right of the poor to receive support."[18] This criticism of the right to support does not imply that support is worthless but that it must remain a moral norm. It is this dissociation of charity and justice that Hugo questions in his speech to the National Assembly by unifying the two domains of duty, the moral and the legal.

Despite this division between liberals and socialists, it was accepted for the first time that society itself is responsible for creating its destitute members. Whereas the old political economy "sees destitution merely as an unfortunate exception to the norm, which is entirely caused by the destitute themselves," it became clear that a "general critique of society is necessary"[19] to demonstrate that it is the very organization of society that generates a whole "floating population"[20] of destitute people for whom "work does not carry any sense of necessity, being devoid of both guarantee and protection."[21] Pauperism is simultaneously the social evil that devours civilization, and the lens for analyzing this evil. Thus, "penury is not caused by the absence of work but by the new organization of work."no13[22] The concept of pauperism thus produces an understanding of destitution whereby views of poverty cease to focus on the temperament of individuals (laziness, idleness, debauchery) but rather on the nature of the social. Destitution becomes the disgrace of the social. It emanates from a critique of the social contract based on the question that threatens to dismantle it.

Today's concept of "the vulnerable" relates to a completely different understanding of social life. The vulnerable are no longer an integral element of a particular social class, that of the "misérables," or later, the working classes. Today there is no specific vulnerable class. This generalization does not produce a generic social critique. What can we find in common between an unemployed person, an AIDS patient, and a victim of terrorist attacks? Nothing but the rise in power of a language game and a way of thinking about vulnerability that isolates a part of the population and subjects them to a particular form of treatment, as vulnerable subjects.

We no longer live in the era of the destitute, but in the era of the vulnerable. "Les Misérables" of yesterday, so powerfully described by Hugo, have given way to the vulnerable of today. Naturally, this does not mean that the destitute no longer exist. Today's homeless and indeed illegal immigrants experience the age-old phenomenology of destitution, in which one of the main problems, for the homeless, is to remain visible[23] and, for the immigrant, to become visible. In the words of Thierry Blin, "Those who are destitute and forgotten, show

18 - François Ewald, *L'État providence* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelles, 1986), 53.

19 - Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en Angleterre et en France* (Paris: Paulin Librairie, 1840), 14.

20 - Ibid., 68.

21 - Ibid., 70.

22 - Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, 351.

23 - See Sylvie Quesemand Zucca, *Je vous salis ma rue. Clinique de la désocialisation* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

yourselves."[24] Yet destitution is increasingly perceived through the common lens of vulnerability, which has become a new common language.

"The vulnerable" no longer simply means the poor, who are defined by thresholds, or even the marginalized, whose condition of exclusion is defined in entirely negative terms, but also those whose social inclusion is potentially problematic, to the point that they are at risk of becoming marginalized. This means that the social problem is no longer framed only in terms of a vertical hierarchy, which can be translated in terms of class or injustice, but there is also a social horizontality whereby inclusion is never a permanent given. We are in fact witnessing a reinvention of the social question. The great fear of the social divide between the socially included and excluded has been eclipsed by an anxiety about the nature of inclusion. The proliferation of the vocabulary of vulnerability is the sign of this anxiety. Being vulnerable no longer means being on the outside, but being on the inside without the guarantee of being able to remain there. Saying that we are vulnerable now means that we are "potentially fragile, likely to slide into a state of heteronomy . . . yet still likely to recover, to get back on our feet, never losing the basic capacities that will allow us to regain autonomy."[25] Vulnerability then becomes a common language, a way of indicating that we are both capable and incapable, autonomous and heteronomous, on the inside and on the outside.

3. Vulnerability as a language game

Within this understanding of vulnerability, it seems to me that careful attention should be paid to the nature of language games that designate lives as vulnerable rather than acknowledging that the vocabulary of vulnerability carries the risk of naturalizing the reality of vulnerability. The vulnerable do not form a new tribe that social critique might at last bring to light in order to reconcile the social with itself. They form distinct populations, groups of subjects who may be spatially separated from each other but who remain linked by the same exposure to risk or uncertainty. Marginalized populationsno17,[26] recipients of social welfare (in France, the Revenu minimum d'insertion or RMI),[27] isolated young divorced mothers, young people who have failed at school, children living in poverty (whose numbers were estimated in France in 2005 at two million), but equally populations living near a nuclear power plant or a Seveso high-risk industrial site can all also be counted as vulnerable populations. Similarly, European directives identify categories of vulnerable people such as asylum seekers, in order to

24 - Thierry Blin, *L'invention des sans-papiers* (Paris: PUF, 2010), 147.

25 - Jean-Louis Genard, 'La question de la responsabilité sous l'horizon du référentiel humanitaire', in Axelle Brodiez-Dolino et al., *Vulnérabilités sanitaires et sociales* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 44, cited in Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, 'Le concept de vulnérabilité', *La vie des idées*, February 11, 2016.

26 - See Louis Chauvel, *Le destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohorte en France au XXe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 2002).

27 - See Danielle Gréco, *Les demandeurs d'emploi bénéficiaires du RMI: Portrait statistique* (Noisy-le-Grand: l'Observatoire de l'ANPE, les Essentiels, June 2002).

identify "people with particular needs.no19"[28] What then makes a population? According to Michel Foucault, a population "is not that kind of original datum, that kind of material" over which political power is exercised as a whole, but a construct that "depends on a series of variables."[29] A population is not an original datum but a whole that acquires consistency through its distinctive features that end up constituting its actual nature. Foucault insists on the apparent naturality of the population but, in reality, it exists not as "a collection of juridical subjects in individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will" but as "a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities, even in accidents."[30] The vulnerable do not form a people, or even strictly speaking a single population, but many populations whose distinctive feature is that their subjects are marked by vulnerability. These populations can of course be interconnected. It is not uncommon for a child brought up in poverty to be raised by a single mother on benefits. New forms of social protection then emerge at the intersection of these vulnerabilities, which are the focus of commissions such as "Families, vulnerability, poverty," created in France in 2005 and chaired by Martin Hirsch, targeting child poverty (see resolution 1), children being precisely the most vulnerable population as they embody a combination of the vulnerabilities related to their parents, their living conditions, and the conditions of their social reception, as well as a hypothetical relationship to the future.

All these forms of analysis lead to the rise, within the literature on vulnerability, of a body of references to the vulnerable that must be utilized in the fight against vulnerability, by considering the vulnerable to be an agent of vulnerability and, hence, as responsible for creating a way out of vulnerability. This point is essential because it has become widespread in all contemporary policy-making that seeks to promote an active social state. In March 2000, when the Lisbon European Council announced its social strategy for the years 2000–2010, it was eloquent in its ambition to "modernize the European social model by investing in European resources and creating an active social state." In this context, the term vulnerable does not refer to fragile individuals who require support whatever the cost; they are not perceived as incapable but as being able to fight against threat, even if this weakens their capacities and necessitates appropriate forms of care. "The aim is to exchange the status of the assisted or subjugated person for that of an active party."[31]

Within the precarious social world, the vulnerable then form a mass of subjects who can be mobilized to combat the precarity to which they are subjected. As a result, a new division arises between the capable and the incapable, between the individuals facing hardship who are nevertheless regarded as agents and those

28 - Édouard Dubout, 'La vulnérabilité saisie par la cour de justice de l'Union européenne', in Laurence Burgorgue Larsen (ed.), *La vulnérabilité saisie par les juges en Europe* (Paris: Cahiers Européens, 2014), 34.

29 - Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977-78 (New York: Springer, 2007)*, 71.

30 - Ibid., 74.

31 - Colette Bec, *La sécurité sociale. Une institution de la démocratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), 267.

who are no longer able to enter into this contract for responsibility required by the contemporary social agreement and so become the marginalized of today. Protection against risks must not come only from external sources, which would equate to treating the vulnerable individual as "a potential victim"; it "imputes responsibility to the individual in the event of the threat."[32] The seeming paradox is that "collective responsibility tends to recede, making the poor responsible for themselves."[33]

This is the arena of the vulnerable. They have in common certain capacities that they must mobilize in order to combat risk. This is evident if we consider two major areas of vulnerability, the domains of the environment and of gerontology. Vulnerability to natural hazards is significantly linked to the inequality of populations when subjected to risk: this inequality is explained by the fact that not all individuals respond to risk in the same way. This understanding moderates the concept of absolute causality and focuses attention on the necessity of taking into account responses to disasters or risks: "Disasters had for long been regarded as a direct outcome of natural hazards, like floods, earthquakes or droughts, but this construction was undermined by the realization that not every hazard results in a disaster, and not every person or group suffers equally in a disaster . . . The crucial link between a hazard—or external threat—and a disaster was found in the notion of a vulnerable population."[34] The state of vulnerability means that exposure to external threats requires a population to act in certain ways that are not necessarily within their capability. In the same vein, the vulnerability of the elderly, a concept that is widely used in gerontology, does not correlate simply to observable fragility, but to the effects of this fragility in terms of increased occurrence of risk of disease and disability on the one hand, and on the responses of the elderly on the other hand. Fragility is a concept that encompasses the risks linked to age and to increased illness. Vulnerability relates to the way in which fragility can undermine the capacity of the elderly person. An elderly person is vulnerable in that the effects of age can deprive him or her of the physiological and psychological means of reacting to whatever weakens them.

It is clear then that vulnerable individuals become eligible for social support only when it is judged that they are able to take measures against their vulnerability, even though their capacities may be weakened by the social situation they are subjected to. This has proven to be the case for the vulnerable in terms of the environment and old age. In both cases, we need to appreciate that a population may still be able to fight against the threat in question, but at the same time we must understand that their capacity to cope may be weakened or unequally distributed.

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32 - Marc-Henry Soulet, 'La vulnérabilité: Examen critique d'une notion', in Marc-Henri Soulet (ed.), *Vulnérabilité: De la fragilité sociale à l'éthique de la sollicitude* (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2014), 34–35.

33 - Colette Bec, 267.

34 - Elizabeth Schröder-Butterfill and Ruly Marianti, 'A Framework for Understanding Old-Age Vulnerabilities', *Ageing and Society*, vol. 26, no 1, 2006, p. 10.

There is then a fundamental ambiguity in the construction of the vulnerable. The vulnerable individual is characterized both by their ability to fight against a major threat and by the fact that this capacity can itself be undermined if support is not available. In North American social sciences research, the vulnerable are those who fundamentally lack the social capital that is essential for self-development: they lack economic resources, they do not have decent housing, they are poorly protected, and have few rights. It is their lack in possession of this capital that exposes them to vulnerability. But they differ from the poor in the fundamental sense that they are still considered to be capable even if their ability to respond is undermined. In fact, vulnerability is deemed to be "exposure to risk and stress and the difficulty of coping with it." [35] As Robert Chambers points out, vulnerability has two sides, an external side, consisting of the risks, accidents, or stress related to a situation, and an internal side, that is, the absence or undermining of the resources needed to deal with a situation. The horizon of vulnerability is loss, whether that be physical, economic, social, or so on. If the answer to poverty is the contribution of income from external sources, even at the risk of debt, the answer to vulnerability is security. Yet debt creates additional insecurity that increases the vulnerability of the poor. Confusing vulnerability and poverty thus increases confusion about the way we can provide social support. Above all, social policies risk heightening the hardships of marginalization if they do not focus on supporting the capacities of the vulnerable.

4. Questions on the social question

Vulnerability is the new social question. Castel has remarked that "the 'social question' is a fundamental aporia through which a society experiences the enigma of its cohesion and tries to ward off the risk of its fracture." [36] "The emergence of a new social question is reflected in an inadequacy of the old methods of social management." [37] Vulnerability is a social question because the existence of "mass vulnerability" [38] raises questions about social ties (" le lien social") and forms of contemporary solidarity. It is the new social question because it throws into crisis precisely those restorative social measures that are linked to the advent of social security, and impels us toward a new way of governing fragile lives, a new way of guiding the conduct of the weakest members of society. The challenge for such a government is no longer primarily to abolish the social evil that devours lives, but rather to leave the social plane as it is, while ensuring that the vulnerability of some does not jeopardize the social life of others, and also enabling the vulnerable themselves to work. On the one hand, reference to vulnerability arouses, in the terms of the old social language, a renewed desire for protection

35 - Robert Chambers, 'Vulnerability, Coping and Policy', *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 20, no 2, Institute of Development Studies, 1989.

36 - Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, 18.

37 - Pierre Rosanvallon, *La nouvelle question sociale*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, 7.

38 - Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, 160.

that the law must take into account.[39] On the other hand, to govern the vulnerable implies their mobilization within the social systems themselves. That is the crucial point. Mobilization of this type presupposes that the vulnerable are able to fight against the fragility that affects them. This requires implementing measures for aid, support, and care that the vulnerable can only make use of under the express condition that they demonstrate good will and take the necessary action to combat their own fragility. There is no *care* without *empowerment* of the vulnerable: this is our new social equation.

If vulnerability is to become the fundamental lens of social analysis, we will need to see a series of shifts in relation to other grids of social analysis. Given that the social has long been interpreted through the analytical lens of exploitation, domination, or marginalization, the fact that it is now being interpreted through the lens of vulnerability reveals new forms of state problematization of the social, leading in turn to a rethinking of the state's welfare function.[40] Herein lies the change: exploitation and marginalization define social relationships and social conditions whereas vulnerability defines social situations. The challenge then is to determine whether or not these situations constitute a new social form.

Historically, the welfare state in France was founded to manage social risk and became a means of understanding marginalization, but it is now increasingly held accountable for vulnerability. The social welfare state is part of the history of the social question. In practice, three social security systems can be seen in the history of societies, and particularly of French society: *assistance* (social welfare), *assurance* (social security) and *accompagnement* (social support). These each have their own mechanisms. The three concepts are by no means homogeneous, but there is also some overlap between them. *Assistance* predates the welfare state, but also outlives it, since it is perpetuated by charitable organizations that currently work in association with the state, although in a partially independent manner. Social welfare became prominent during the age of industrialization, when poverty became so widespread that its cause could no longer be attributed to the fault of the "unworthy" poor. The rapid surge in begging during the nineteenth century triggered a corresponding increase in social benefits, which was institutionalized through the laws of July 15, 1893, June 27, 1904, and July 14, 1905 on free medical aid, child support, and aid for the elderly, the infirm, and the chronically ill. This social welfare can be seen as the counterpart of the obligation upon the poor to work: the sick are assisted on the assumption that they will be able to work in the future, children are placed in care because they will work in the future, and the elderly have already worked. A balance was thus achieved between "the burden on 'society,' which has a duty of welfare, as a consequence of the social pact, and the burden on the individual, who is obliged to work."[41] This balance was upset by the appearance of a second system for social provision,

39 - See Xavier Lagarde report, 'Les personnes vulnérables dans la jurisprudence de la Cour de cassation' (Paris: La Documentation française, 2009).

40 - See Hélène Thomas, 'Les vulnérables. La démocratie contre les pauvres' (Villefranche: Éditions du croquant, 2010.

41 - Colette Becq, *La sécurité sociale...*, 47.

that of *assurance*, which culminated in the institution of social security in France in 1945. *Assurance* was a response to an explicit criticism of welfare, which had been accused of encouraging a culture of dependence and laziness: the new system made the provision of support anonymous and self-sustaining; it also emphasized the need for foresight and reflected the democratic ideal of security. Where mutual funds had failed to implement real protection and redistributive justice,[42] the social security system succeeded in France because it appeared to be a national system of great compatibility with the social and national value of solidarity, creating a system of obligation that encompassed both employers and employees; this can be seen in the 1898 law on industrial accidents, but also in the laws of April 5, 1910 on workers' and farm workers' pensions, and of April 5, 1928 on social security. The social security system established the need for "restorative justice" as a measure that is "protective for the present and preventive for the future."[43] This concept has now been reformulated in the system for supporting the vulnerable. The concept has not been eradicated, but it is no longer underpinned by a passive and universal social state—rather, by an active and individualizing social state, which corresponds with statistics on the role of the "strategic state" in governmental practices. The state no longer exerts control over the abstract individual of social law, but rather over the individual as a concrete entity. Above all, the social security system relaxed the relationship between aid and work, whereas the system of social support re-established the correlation between aid and work. The Preamble to the French Constitution of 1946, which saw the creation of social security, states that "[The Nation] shall guarantee to all . . . protection of their health, material security, rest and leisure" and that "All people who, by virtue of their age, physical or mental condition, or economic situation, are incapable of working, shall have the right to receive suitable means of existence from society."[44] Contemporary arrangements for support (such as Revenu de solidarité active, or RSA, the French form of income support, or Pôle Emploi, the French governmental agency for unemployment support) only "aid" the vulnerable if they are actively seeking work. The social rights embedded in a philosophy of justice that affirmed a strong link between equality and solidarity are now increasingly conditional upon the renewed activity of the vulnerable. This means that protection, contrary to the stance of Laroque and also Beveridge, ceases to be embedded in the intention of a just society and is instead the concern of a highly competitive society.

The extent to which the problematization of the social question has been transformed is clear. The claim that a vulnerable person being supported is different to a destitute person receiving benefits or a poor person with social insurance certainly does not imply that there are no more poor or destitute individuals, but rather that ways of responding to the social question no longer

42 - Ibid., 54.

43 - Alfred Fouillée, *La science sociale contemporaine* (Paris: Hachette, 1880), 369, cited in Colette Becq, *La sécurité sociale*, 63.

44 - *Preamble to the Constitution of 27 October 1946*, available at: https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/cst3.pdf

embody the moralist view of welfare or the solidarity-based conception of security, but rather a performative form of support. Marginalization, which can be said to encompass both poverty and destitution, is a deficiency-based concept, whereas vulnerability is a capability-related concept that also presupposes a politics of situations and a politics of individuals.[45] Poverty and marginalization are related to the absence of one or more social attributes so that, to a greater or lesser degree, the individual is placed in a state of social insecurity, against which a society based on justice must fight. On the other hand, vulnerability, whose precarity undoubtedly constitutes the ultimate social challenge, places a focus on the capacity of the vulnerable individual to respond to their condition. Vulnerability therefore equates to a new responsibilization of the subject, unlike fragility. "Vulnerability makes us consider individuals' capacity for agency. It is the positive counterpart of responsibilization."[46] It therefore implies a new age for the protective social state.[47] This new call to focus on the responsibilization of the precarious penetrates the French welfare systems of RMI and especially RSA. It also sheds light on their relative failure.[48]

5. Acknowledging vulnerability?

Is it not the case, then, that the category of vulnerability is misleading? It might be tempting to rid ourselves of the concept, but the same reservations arise for a whole series of related concepts, starting with that of precarity. Far from looking backward to an ontology of essentially distinct individuals, we must go forward by reflecting on what makes life fragile, on what we will call non-sovereign life, which helps us to make sense of vulnerability. What is a non-sovereign life? It is a life located outside of itself, because of the support and care networks that hold and contain it, but also due to its exposure to violence, which it cannot anticipate or avoid. Acknowledging the vulnerability of all life is then equivalent to acknowledging that lives may not be sovereign but that they are nonetheless agents. Understanding how the power to live proceeds from vulnerability, not in order to rid oneself of it or overcome it as if actions could arise out of vulnerability and destroy it, but in order to reveal the viability of vulnerability—this amounts to saying that the power to live resides in the power to be affected.[49] On this level, we can turn to the philosophy of Spinoza, as it is reread by Deleuze, to better understand the power to live as the power to be affected; the main thing is to emphasize that it is precisely that which places us outside

45 - See Fabienne Brugère, *La politique de l'individu* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

46 - Marc-Henry Soulet, 'La vulnérabilité, une ressource à manier avec prudence', 24.

47 - Of particular interest are works by US lawyer Martha Albertson Fineman, especially 'The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 20, 2008–2009 and Martha Albertson Fineman and Anna Grear (eds.), *Vulnerability. Reflections for a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

48 - Bernard Gomel and Anne Eydoux (eds.), *Apprendre de l'échec du RSA. La solidarité active en question* (Rueil-Malmaison: Éditions Liaisons, 2014).

49 - See Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

of ourselves that intensifies the power to live as action in a world of actions. It is therefore in the relationality of lives that we can grasp a sense of vulnerability that is not essentially tied to a form of government of the most fragile individuals, and would accordingly give rise to a new social divide between lives capable of acting on whatever weakens them (the vulnerable) and lives unable to defend themselves against what weakens them (the fragile).[50]

One of the risks of the vocabulary of vulnerability is precisely that it may produce a politically fraught distinction between the fragile and the vulnerable, by insisting on the capability of the vulnerable as a means of distancing them from a negative reading of the fragile. There is then a real risk that the ensuing renewal of our ontologies of life would be greatly to the detriment of the most disadvantaged, restoring an entire hierarchy of forms of life and thus making the assumption that certain lives are normal as opposed to other lives that are considered to be pathological. Ultimately, we would be at the highest risk of reconstructing the social edifice with the vulnerable at its center, while below them, like some kind of invisible population, would be a tangle of failing, weak, and fragile lives wallowing in loss, with the upper floor occupied by the joyous subjects, successfully integrated into capitalist mobilization.

To reject this hierarchized reading of the social and to pay attention to vulnerability is precisely to refuse to reduce the social to such an ontology by opening it up in many ways, by detotalizing it in relation to the multiplicity of ordeals of vulnerability, of which it remains impossible to identify the most terrible, a priori and also a posteriori. From the loss of a job to the loss of a home, from the terror of certain women who are subjected to the violence of certain men, to the extreme precarity of exiles fleeing from countries where terror reigns, it is not easy to reconstruct a hierarchized social sphere. And this is undoubtedly the main virtue of awareness of vulnerability: it forces us to reconsider the social in its multiple forms of life and to consider the ways in which it affects these lives, but also to consider the way in which these forms of life appear in the social sphere, deconstructing it and reconstructing it differently. Therein lies the ultimate meaning of vulnerability, which for Judith Butler is not to be overcome or conquered by acts that would eliminate it, but which is something that must be exposed and considered as an act itself, so to speak. Vulnerability must not give rise to a government that, as an external factor, would lead it toward its ultimate solution, namely a return to normality; rather, it must put itself on open display through the bodies, words, and performances of the vulnerable so that it becomes a visible vulnerability. This publicization of vulnerability can only be carried out by those who live their lives as vulnerable. And so, when, shortly before the destruction of the Calais Jungle, the migrants who lived there gagged their own mouths to demonstrate that their voices were heard by no one, they were exhibiting one of the forms of their own vulnerability, their inaudibility, thus making themselves visible in that inaudibility. Vulnerability must not, for Butler, be overcome from the outside, it must be exhibited from within lives that, even as they take action, remain precarious.

50 - Ibid, Ch. 8.

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Abstract

How can we understand vulnerability?

Based on a historicization of the shift from the social and political ontology of the "misérable" (destitute) or "fragile" subject to that of the "vulnerable" subject, this article highlights the flaws of capability-oriented interpretations of vulnerability, and in particular the way it increases the precarity of the most fragile members of society. In response to Judith Butler's introductory article, it redirects us toward her philosophy by suggesting that, in order to move away from those neoliberal and paternalistic flaws, we should embrace an understanding of vulnerability that is not intended to be governed nor overcome, but rather, to be "exposed" by vulnerable people themselves.

Résumé

Qu'est-ce que s'orienter dans la vulnérabilité ?

À partir d'une historicisation du passage de l'ontologie sociale et politique du sujet « misérable » ou « fragile », à celle du sujet « vulnérable », cet article met en lumière les travers des lectures capacitaires de la vulnérabilité, et en particulier ses effets de précarisation sur les plus fragiles. Faisant écho à l'article proposé en introduction de ce dossier par Judith Butler, il nous réoriente vers sa philosophie, en nous proposant, pour nous départir de ces travers néolibéraux tout autant que de ses dimensions paternalistes, d'embrasser une compréhension de la vulnérabilité qui n'aurait pas vocation à être « conduite » ni même dépassée, mais qui aspirerait plutôt à être rendue visible par les « vulnérables » eux-mêmes.