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Ethics of Survival: A Democratic Approach to the Politics of Life

It is originary: life is survival.

—Jacques Derrida*

What is the human? One way to confront this question has been, since antiquity, to distinguish the human from the animal, or rather to ask how humans are not just animals. It is well known that Aristotle's answer was to affirm that "man is by nature a political animal" and that speech—or language—yields him this exclusive quality by giving him "a sense of good and evil, of just and unjust."¹ During the twentieth century, this question about the human has been reformulated, in a philosophical lineage from Walter Benjamin to Hannah Arendt to Giorgio Agamben, into a question about "life," sometimes even rephrased in terms of "biopolitics"—or more precisely, as I have argued, of "politics of life."² The distinction between man and animal has thus become a difference between physical or biological life, which man has in common with the rest of the animal kingdom, and social or political, life, which renders him unique.

Born from the experience of two world wars and two totalitarianisms, this reading of the human condition recently took a tragic turn and a radical form which became central in the analysis of the situation of the refugees and the displaced, the poor and the dominated, with the camp presented as the biopolitical figure par excellence. In light of what can be considered as Jacques Derrida's legacy, but also of my fieldwork in townships and former homelands in South Africa, I will discuss here this vision of the politics of life which has exerted an increasing influence in the humanities and social sciences during the last decade, and I will propose an alternative reading.

"Long before the experience of survival that I am presently facing, I wrote that survival is an original concept which constitutes the very structure of what we call existence. We are, structurally speaking, survivors, marked by this structure of the trace, of the testament. That said, I would not endorse the view according to which survival is more on the side of death and the past than of life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the affirmation of life."³ A few weeks before his death, Jacques Derrida gave his last interview in which he developed at length his conception of life as survival. Suffering from a terminal disease, he confided: "Since certain health problems are becoming more pressing, the question of survival and reprieve, which has always haunted me, literally, every moment of my life, in a concrete and tireless way, takes on a different color today." In reference to a sentence he had used in one of his books ("I would finally like to know how to live") he

commented with a penetrating irony: “No, I never learned to live. Definitely not! Learning to live should mean learning to die. I never learned to accept death. I remain impervious to being educated in the wisdom of knowing how to die.”

However, beyond the emergency of this “shrinking time of reprieve” (which he rejected with humor, saying, “we are not here for a health bulletin”), it is the more general problem of survival on which the philosopher wanted to meditate: “I have always been interested in the question of survival, the meaning of which does not add to life and death. It is originary: life is survival.” In fact, both dimensions were for him intimately related, the personal experience repeating the existential experience, the circumstantial ordeal making the structural reality more evident and more painful. How else to understand that on the verge of death, thinking about survival could become so insistent in this interview, until the final profession of faith? “Everything I say about survival as a complication of the opposition between life and death proceeds from an unconditional affirmation of life. Survival is life beyond life, life more than life, and the discourse I undertake is not about death. On the contrary, it is the affirmation of a living being who prefers life and therefore survival to death, because survival is not simply what remains; it is the most intense life possible.”

I want to show that Derrida’s conception of life as survival, in its polysemy and even its ambiguity, may offer an alternative to conceptions of life which, from Benjamin to Agamben, and in a quite different perspective, from Lamarck to Canguilhem, have presented a seductive dualistic framework for the humanities and social sciences. Both visions are inherited from Aristotle. On the one hand, life is presented as biopolitical fact: “Behind the long strife-ridden process that leads to the recognition of rights and formal liberties stands the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may be killed,” affirms Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, where he develops his theory of “bare life.”⁴ From the “politicization of life” in totalitarian systems to the “isolation of the sacred life” in contemporary democracies, he therefore establishes a continuum of the power over life. On the other hand, life is conceived as a biological phenomenon: “any datum of experience possible to trace as a history comprised between its birth and its death is living, is the object of biological knowledge,” writes Georges Canguilhem for the entry “Life” in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*.⁵ He presents life successively as “animation,” “mechanism,” “organization,” and “information,” in a chronological review of biological theories extending from ancient conceptions to contemporary genetics—and everyone knows that the genome is often said to be the “code of life.”

In other words, these two readings present life as what can be put to death (for Agamben), and as what is comprised from birth to death (for Canguilhem). The social sciences have largely drawn from these two repertoires: the former has been used to comprehend the government of populations and human beings; the latter has nourished the sociology and anthropology of sciences and techniques. However different they may be, these two models rest on the same premises. Both treat life as a physical phenomenon, whether it is “bare life” or “biological life” (both philosophers insisting that it is the dimension shared with the entire animal kingdom). And both assume that life can be separated, for scientific or political reasons, from life as an existential phenomenon, whether it is called “qualified life” or “lived experience” (by Agamben

and Canguilhem respectively).⁶ It seems to me that Derrida's reflection shatters this distinction: "survival" mixes inextricably physical life, threatened by his cancer, and existential experience, expressed in his work. To survive is to be still fully alive and to live beyond death. It is the "unconditional affirmation" of life and the pleasure of living, and it is the hope of "surviving" through the traces left for the living.

There is, I believe, in this revelation much more than the last testimony of a philosopher who did not accustom us to such clarity and simplicity. I see it as an ethical gesture through which life is rehabilitated in its most obvious and most ordinary dimension—life which has death for horizon but which is not separated from life as a social form, inscribed in a history, a culture, an experience. I consider the consequences of this gesture to be decisive for the humanities and social sciences: or so I want to argue here.

Too often, in recent years, anthropologists and sociologists have tended, under the influence of the philosophical conceptions of life presented above, to take for granted the distinction between the forms of life they affirm—qualified life versus bare life or physical existence versus existential experience. Indeed this reductionism, when it is employed in the study of biological sciences, is fully justified, although its definition of life often seems hegemonic, or at least forgetful of other possibilities: some even speak of "life itself." Conversely, when it is applied to the study of human government, it generally has the effect of disqualifying as inferior the lives of individuals or groups that society appears to reduce to their condition of "bare life": refugees, excluded, marginalized, sick. Having been myself receptive to this dualism, and still sympathetic to the philosophers who proposed it, but also having observed among many colleagues and students the attraction exerted by this paradigm of bare life, I am sensitive not only to the intellectual risk but also to the ethical danger represented by its indiscriminate use in the humanities and social sciences. This is why I will concentrate my critical analysis on the biopolitical rather than biological reading of life.

In the first part, I will therefore trace the genealogy of this tragic vision of the politics of life, from Benjamin to Arendt to Agamben, but not Foucault, for reasons I will explain. I want to show that no necessary line was followed; instead, specific alternatives were opened: in fact, the exploration of the politics of life could certainly have followed other paths. In the second part, I will evoke South African lives in the time of AIDS, focusing on biographies of the afflicted and ending with the most publicized of them. I actually read the interview with Derrida while conducting my research in the townships and former homelands of a country with which the French philosopher was quite familiar, since he actively fought the apartheid regime. The resonance of his words with the interviews I was collecting for my fieldwork immediately struck me: this coincidence is what drove me to consider the anthropological consequences of the concept of survival.

Genealogy

"To survive, in the usual sense of the word, is to continue to live, but also to live after death," Derrida explains in his last interview, adding: "Speaking of translation, Benjamin underlines the distinction between *überleben*, to live after death, as a book

can survive the death of its author or the child the death of parents, and *fortleben*, to continue to live.” It is therefore in reference to Benjamin that Derrida proposes the dual meaning of his experience of survival: to live beyond and to keep on living, at the frontier of the biographical and the biological. However, of this profound reflection there remains little trace. Those who claim to be Benjamin’s heirs are generally inclined to refer to his critique of violence. Conversely, I want to examine the forgotten alternatives and tragic choices in the genealogy of contemporary philosophies of life.

Mere life

In his essay “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin proposes this surprising parallel: “Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life than from its afterlife.”⁷ There is therefore a life of the original and a survival through its “translation,” but also through its “glory”—and more generally a life that escapes materiality, a life that is “not limited to organic corporeality.” This intuition allows him to shift from literary work to a more general reflection on life: “In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature. The philosopher’s task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history.” What is true for the work of art is also true for the human being. The full recognition of his life lies in this history where nature is inscribed. Biography prevails over biology, and history over nature.

Two years earlier, however, Benjamin had published another article, titled “Critique of Violence,” which ended with a discussion of life in reference to revolutionary violence: “The proposition that existence stands higher than just existence is false and ignominious, if existence means nothing more than mere life.”⁸ He later expands on this distinction: “Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, no more than any other of his conditions and qualities, not even with the uniqueness of his bodily person.” In other words, “however sacred man is,” it cannot be a consequence of his “bodily life,” as implied in the “dogma of the sacredness of life.” This is why, for Benjamin, not all violence should be condemned: if “lawmaking violence,” which is “executive,” and “law-preserving violence,” which “serves it,” are “pernicious,” he writes, then by contrast, violence exerted over other men for a superior good may be necessary, since it is respectful of life, not as “mere life” but as “that life that is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife.” There is something in life that is not reducible to its physical dimension but includes and exceeds it.

The formulation of the concept of “mere life,” as contrasted with “just life,” and the critique of “the sanctity of life,” as opposed to the “sacredness of man,” have given birth to numerous comments and to a philosophical descent that has nourished a tragic perspective in the humanities and social sciences. We should take its measure and consider its consequences. First, it establishes a distinction in the sacredness of the human between the uniqueness of the bodily person and the continuity of his or her life beyond this material dimension. Second, it institutes a hierarchy between the

two, just existence being above mere life. There is a dual operation, therefore, of differentiation and evaluation. Contemporary approaches preserve this reading of life. In Benjamin's own mind, however, it did not exclude a more tempered view, according to which life integrates its various forms without rupture, linking bodily existence and immaterial survival, nature, and history.

Life itself

An admirer of Benjamin whose work she prefaced, Hannah Arendt positioned the question of life at the center of her interpretation of the French Revolution: "Behind the appearances was a reality, and this reality was biological and not historical, though it appeared now perhaps for the first time in history." This biological theory of revolutionary movements, which is explicitly a critique of Marxism, is more complex than it seems. On the one hand, Arendt conceives of it as the production of a social body: "The biological imagery underlies and pervades the organic and social theories of history, which all have in common that they see a multitude—the factual plurality of a nation or a people or society—in the image of a supernatural body driven by one superhuman, irresistible, general will." On the other hand, Arendt sees the physical force as the ultimate justification of revolutionary violence: "It was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor." There is therefore implicitly a dual dimension in this theory of life as the source of the revolution. It is organicist (the unified multitude) and materialist (the pressing necessity) at once: "This raging force may well nigh appear irresistible because it lives from and is nourished by the necessity of biological life itself." Associating both dimensions, Marx "strengthened more than anybody else the politically most pernicious doctrine of the modern age, namely that life is the highest good, and that the life process of society is the very center of human endeavor." Also a critic of the sacralization of life, Arendt however dissociates herself from Benjamin by her rejection of Marxist theory from which he drew his theory of history. Indeed, between the two, the Leninist project has turned into the Stalinist totalitarianism, the crimes of which are increasingly acknowledged.⁹

The analysis of the human condition that Hannah Arendt presented two years earlier adopts a less dramatic position. "*Vita activa*," distinguished from "*vita contemplativa*," comprises three components: labor, work, and action. Even as the philosopher attempts to grasp "the ever-recurrent cyclical movement of nature," she immediately adds: "The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences, but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart." Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of mankind is only possible under this condition: the survival of humanity occurs through the birth and death of human beings, who are unique, in other words, irreducible to their natural existence. The two dimensions are indissociable. On the one hand, life, "limited by a beginning and an end, follows a strictly linear movement whose very motion nevertheless is driven by the motor of biological life which man shares with other living things and which forever retains the cyclical movement of nature." On the other hand, life, "specifically human, is itself full of

events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography.” Referring to Aristotle, she therefore opposes “this life, *bios*” with “mere *zoē*,” history and language establishing what is the human proper.¹⁰

Within a few short years, Arendt thus proposes two quite distinct readings of life. The premises are identical: life as a natural phenomenon is differentiated from life as a historical phenomenon; biology is contrasted to biography. However, the relation between the two is, in one case, conflictual and tragic; in the other, it is harmonious and reconciled. In her essay on the French Revolution, she affirms that biological life placed at the center of politics dooms human beings to hard times. In her study of the human condition, she asserts that separating bodily existence from human experience is fortunately impossible. She criticizes Marx on the first front. She returns to Aristotle on the second one. Here, the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* suggests complementarities rather than contradictions.

Bare life

Relying on the same philosophical corpus, Giorgio Agamben follows a quite distinct path in his inquiry on *homo sacer*. This “figure of the archaic Roman law in which the character of sacredness is tied for the first time to a human life as such” signifies that certain criminals may be considered as human beings whose ritual killing is forbidden but whose possible murder is covered by impunity. This paradox of the *homo sacer* becomes the point of departure of a profound reflection on “sovereign power and bare life,” with a parallel drawn between the king’s body and the refugee’s condition. According to Agamben, these extreme cases—the power of the former and the vulnerability of the latter—are inscribed in the long history of the politicization of physical life and of a sovereignty founded on exception. Following Arendt’s proposition, Agamben radicalizes the Aristotelian distinction. On the one hand, he accentuates differences and hardens significations: he contrasts *zoē*, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings,” which is “excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense and remains confined to the sphere of the *oikos*,” with *bios*, “the way of living proper to an individual or a group,” which is also a “qualified life, a particular way of life.” Between the two, no possible path is envisaged. On the other hand, he underscores, almost contradictorily, the confusion: “politics appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized”; consequently, “in the politicization of bare life, the humanity of living man is decided.” Thus the Western world is marked, from its very origin, by the inscription of biological life in the heart of political life. This aporia of separation and confusion of *bios* and *zoē* would therefore be the ultimate truth of our modernity: “The decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter in a zone of irreducible indistinction.” *Homo sacer*, long ago confined to the margins of society, is thus presented as the central figure of our world.¹¹

Continuing this first exploration of the relation between life and politics, Agamben offers a second inquiry dealing with the state of exception, which he conceives as “the

original means of referring to and encompassing life” and as “no-man’s land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life.” This study finds a particular international resonance in the post-9/11 context marked by the multiplication of procedures of exception, from the U.S. Patriot Act to the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. The state of exception may serve as “paradigm of government” inasmuch as, drawing the consequences of Benjamin’s famous affirmation that “the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” Agamben considers that, far from being exceptional, the state of exception has become a “technique of government” which “threatens radically to alter—in fact has already palpably altered—the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forces.” Therefore, he can assert that, from a juridical perspective, the *Lager* where the Nazis confined Jews is “the only thing to which could possibly be compared” the prisons in Afghanistan where the U.S. army detained Taliban forces. By doing so, he merely illustrates the general thesis he had introduced earlier: “Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.” He explains that this thesis “throws a sinister light on the models by which social sciences, urban studies, and architecture today are trying to conceive and organize the public space of the world’s cities, without clear awareness that at their very center, lies the same bare life (even if it has been transformed and rendered apparently more human) that defined biopolitics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century.” The radicalism of this proposition, though it provoked critical reactions, also elicited an intense echo in the humanities and social sciences, as bare life, the exception, and the camp became ordinary figures to think about our world, its repressive policies as well as its humanitarian practices.¹²

Thus, if Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt kept a door open to a possible reconciliation between bodily existence and political life, nature and history, biology and biography, Giorgio Agamben definitely excludes this hypothesis. For him, the two forms of life are simultaneously incompatible and confused—for the worse. On the one hand, they exclude each other, and bare life increasingly prevails over qualified life. On the other hand, they include each other and bare life blends itself into qualified life. We therefore observe a “separation of the humanitarian and the political” which is the extreme expression of the “interlacement of *bios* and *zoē*.” In this perspective, a continuum exists between the concentration camp and the refugee camp: “The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the Germans, the *Konzentrationslager für Ausländer* in Cottbus-Sielow in which the Weimar government gathered Jewish refugees from the East, or the *zones d’attente* in French international airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained will then all equally be camps.” According to this worldview, no way out can be envisaged: “There is no return from the camps to classical politics.”¹³

Beyond this radical pessimism, the tragedy of the extension of *homo sacer* to contemporary societies thus suggests two further remarks. On one side, there is a hierarchical conception of lives (physical life being reduced to bare life) which is also a hierarchical conception of human beings (between those who only have their bare

life left and those whose life is qualified). On the other, there is an undifferentiated conception of politics (the distinction between deportation toward the home country and deportation toward the extermination camps becoming secondary), which is also an undifferentiated conception of the *polis* (since in both cases no return to politics is possible). Without caricaturing the thesis of the Italian philosopher, whose critical power is certainly provocative, it remains that this reading of the politics of life may be said to be nondemocratic because of the hierarchy of lives it supposes, the indistinction of the political it implies, and perhaps even more the disappearance of subjects.

Epilogue 1 (Foucault's absence)

One might be surprised by the absence of reference to Michel Foucault in a genealogy of biopolitics—here considered as politics of biological life. Is he not the one who coined the word as one of the two expressions of biopower, “the power to make live and let die” in which he saw the entry in our political modernity?¹⁴ Is he not the author with whom Giorgio Agamben engages his own reflection on “the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power, and politics turns into biopolitics”?¹⁵ One should certainly answer affirmatively to both questions but also add that in fact, as I have tried to show elsewhere, it is not life that interests Michel Foucault when he speaks of biopolitics, but “populations” considered as a modern invention.¹⁶

In *The Will to Knowledge*, he characterizes biopolitics as the technologies of regulation of populations. Subsequently, in his course on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he actually explores the emergence of political economy and liberal reason. In other words, if biopower is initially described as a power over life which substitutes itself to sovereign power as a right to kill, and even if Foucault briefly relates the question of biology and of politics in his genealogy of the racial discourse in his lectures *Society Must Be Defended*, he essentially delivers a biopolitical theory without life, if I dare say.¹⁷ However, he suggests a remarkably fruitful insight with his famous assertion: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence, modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”¹⁸ What this government of life was remains an open question. His followers will often close its potentialities. But it should be reminded that, for a series of reasons from his personal commitments to various social movements and political protests of his time to his later theoretical orientation toward the ethical dimension of the government of the self and others, Foucault had a very democratic sense of public and private life.

Biographies

“We are all survivors on reprieve (and from a geopolitical point of view, the emphasis is mostly, in a more unequal world than ever, on the billions of living beings—human or not—who are denied not only the basic ‘human rights’ which go back two hundred years ago and are increasingly expanded, but also the right to a life worth living).” This aside is quite noteworthy in Jacques Derrida’s last interview, which is otherwise essentially personal. Nevertheless, it is not surprising given his commitments to

numerous causes and particularly—we may have forgotten—to the struggle against apartheid. It invites a political turn to the restitution of his experience, and which would inscribe it in a broader interrogation of global inequality in terms of life and survival.

It is in this direction that I will continue my inquiry by examining three biographical fragments collected in the townships of Soweto and Alexandra, near Johannesburg, and ending with a public figure, in each case to underline the extent to which physical existence and qualified life find a complex and subtle articulation—not in the tragic mode of the exception but in the ordinary experience of persons within a democratic space.

This research concerns AIDS in South Africa from 2000–2005, when the country became the most severely affected with the disease in the world (with approximately five millions infected individuals, about one fifth of the adult population.)¹⁹ The epidemic revealed profound inequalities that the politics of segregation and later the regime of apartheid had deepened. The most visible of these disparities concerned access to antiretroviral drugs, complicated by the government's reluctance to implement an effective health care and prevention policy. Each of the four persons I evoke was confronted by the issue of survival, as was, in a tragic way, the entire country, or rather part of it: the director of the Centre for Actuarial Research at the University of Cape Town, Rob Dorrington, anticipated a twenty-year decrease in the life expectancy of African people over two decades, and the director of the Medical Research Council of South Africa, Malegapuru Makgoba, dramatically announced that the day would come when Blacks would be a minority. My reflection on the four cases is mostly presented around extracts of interviews, but it is embedded in ethnographic work conducted over six years, which allows me to venture some of the interpretations I propose and to draw a parallel with the same kind of oral material from Derrida's last interview.

I know I will survive

In her small house in Alexandra where her illness, now in a terminal phase, confines her, Sophia greets me with these words: “Such a long time since I last saw you,” adding with a sad smile: “Next time I will be dead.” She knows how serious her condition is and she has actually made arrangements for her funerals. However, a little while later, she tells me: “I think I will survive: I have this belief. I know I will survive.” How can we take into account this tension between the anticipation of death and the expectation of survival? And how can we fail to draw a parallel between this formulation—and maybe experience—and that of Derrida?

Certainly at first glance, one could see a contradiction here: the acknowledgment of a death foretold versus the denial of an intolerable perspective. Rather than contradiction, one should actually speak of ambiguity, a sort of psychological hesitation between realism and optimism. A religious reference enhances this interpretation. “I will succeed, because my church helps me a lot, even the priest helps me a lot.” The numerous, mostly Christian African churches (Sophia is Methodist) recruit many of their believers among AIDS patients, to whom they promise a survival that is both physical healing, moral rebirth, and spiritual felicity in the hereafter. The distinction

between the three promises is never clear and it is precisely this uncertainty that makes painful moments livable and sometimes even happy. Between natural life, good life, and eternal life, frontiers are porous; and AIDS patients consider survival in all these registers simultaneously. When Sophia strangely exclaims: “I don’t want this virus to destroy my life!” she is therefore beyond the apparent contradiction between her words and her condition.

Yet on second glance—though this is not incompatible with the previous analysis—one must consider the tension observed in her assertions in a deeper sense. Sophia knows she will die; she has seen a priest to tell him exactly the way she wants her burial, even choosing the music to be played that day. The survival to which she alludes when she says “I know I will survive” corresponds to two orders of reality. On the one hand, it is the life that remains to be lived, from which she wants to benefit as fully and as significantly as possible. She intends to use her reprieve to visit her father’s tomb and carry out a ritual of separation and reparation. She must talk to him and tell him about her disease, her boyfriend’s death, her son’s birth. But the time that remains is also composed of moments of happiness. She just met a man who is in love with her and to whom she has revealed her status. He keeps on coming and his company comforts her. She confides in him about her illness, her symptoms, her medicines, her fears, and the impossibility of living a normal life as a couple. Her physical existence thus nourishes her affective life without, however, any confusion between the two.

On the other hand, there is life that will survive her death and will allow her to exist for others beyond her bodily disappearance. She will leave a child whom she knows will be the object of disputes between his maternal and paternal families, in particular because of the foster grants that grandparents receive from the state for taking care of orphans. But in order for her son to remember her long after her death, Sophia has made, a memory-box, as patients often do with the help of nongovernmental organizations. It contains various objects such as clothes and a shoe, a photo of her before she became emaciated by the disease, a tape on which she has recorded a few minutes of an autobiographical narrative, a notebook where she keeps a written version of her history, and a print of her palm on a piece of plaster. Survival thus means for Sophia “to continue to live” and “to live beyond death,” as Derrida asserts in his interview. She says it with simple but profound words that I have heard more than once in South Africa.

It’s just normal life

It is by speaking with Mesias that I understood how greatly forms of life were interconnected without being confused and were reflected upon by my interlocutors, including in Soweto, where I had first met him. “The only thing is that the challenge of life will be when you wake up in the morning—as long as you wake up in the morning. Because, you know, our process is to be born and to die—but in between that is life.” Intrigued by this formulation in the style of Arendt, I inquire about what this means more specifically for him: “My life: it’s just normal life. Normal life is what people live out of it. That is normal life: having food in your stomach, having somebody next to you, being respected in your community.” Physiological life,

affective life, and social life: a trilogy of qualified lives that do not draw separation between the body and society. This description precisely corresponded to what Mesias had finally attained after many years when none of these three conditions was met. But what did he mean by this remarkable formulation—“normal life”? In light of the multiple exchanges I have had with him over several years, I have the impression that it had a dual signification: first, it is an ordinary life (it is in the norm considered as the statistical mean); second, it is a moral life (it is in conformity with the norm in the sense of what is good). In fact, both this ordinary life and this moral life were a new experience for him, since until that point he had only known uncertainty and disorder in his private and public life.

Originally from the province of Limpopo in the north of the country, when Mesias arrived in the city, he lived the turbulent and precarious life typical of many adolescents and youth in the last years of the regime of apartheid. He spent some time with a prostitute, then met a woman with whom he had a baby who died of AIDS a few months later. This is how both of them discovered their viral status. They eventually broke up and he settled in the small town where his family resided. Mesias lived there with a new companion to whom he did not disclose his medical condition and who learned one day that she too was infected. More than worrying about his own disease, it was the consciousness that he might have transmitted it to the woman he loved that had profoundly affected Mesias. His partner had initiated him to the Zion Christian Church, the most important religious group in South Africa, and this experience accelerated his moral conversion. He adopted a handicapped child, quit drinking and going out, and participated in AIDS prevention campaigns. He soon gained the esteem of his neighborhood and even beyond, since he often spoke on the radio about his condition and the promotion of risk-free practices. The disability grant he received from the state as a right because of his illness gave him for the first time the opportunity to have a decent and independent existence: he could even rent a house. His disease evolved into a social resource, not only because of its economic consequences but also due to its moral and even civic implications. He had “learned how to live,” to use Derrida’s words. Just like many other patients I met in South Africa.

I am not of the dying type

At the end of a lengthy interview she gave me, Magda, whom I had known for a long time, stated: “People say, ‘Yeah, you’re going to die because you’re HIV-positive.’ Myself, I used to say, ‘I am not of the dying type.’ I am living, I am being strong, because I am not scared of anybody now.” Still a young woman, Magda has had a particularly hard life. During her childhood, raised by her grandmother in rural Lesotho, she was the victim of repeated rapes by one of her uncles. When her mother, a migrant worker, asked her to join her in her new homestead in KwaZulu-Natal, Magda was subjected to the authority of a violent stepfather who constantly abused her sexually. At the age of eighteen, she left for Johannesburg, where, without resource or shelter, she slept with men she would meet on the street in exchange for a meal or a drink. She did not consider this activity as prostitution, which she regarded as organized sex work in hotels. She thought of herself as merely surviving, using a Zulu

word, *phanding*, which means to scratch the ground to find food. She later had several jobs and various boyfriends. With one of them she had a child who died of AIDS at a very young age. Having fallen ill herself, she rented a shack in Alexandra on her own and started a new life.

A local nongovernmental organization financed by international funds and involved in home-based care hired her. Since she also started to receive a disability grant from the state because of her medical condition, her economic situation improved rapidly. She then decided to have a child, but to avoid the tragic fate of her first-born, she volunteered to participate in a clinical trial in the Soweto hospital. She received antiretroviral drugs for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission and later for the treatment of her illness. At that time, the government was still hesitant about the efficacy and risk of these medicines and had not authorized their use in public health facilities. The child was born healthy and Magda's condition also notably improved. Through her association with the social workers and physicians involved in the combat against AIDS, she herself became an activist. She went to numerous marches and spectacular protests against the government, with several newspaper articles about her appearing in the national and even international press. Magda was able to recapture her life, of which violence, misery, and disease had seemed to rob her. She even built, on the basis of her threatened biological life, a political project which gave a new meaning to her public life just as she founded a family project which introduced a new sense to her private life, therefore escaping the alternative between the *polis* and the *oikos*. And like Jacques Derrida, she never "learned to accept death." Her bodily survival, which was unlikely when her disease was discovered, was a reprieve gained over her death toll through a series of social engagements and political combats which had biological life for their object.

Epilogue 2 (Achmat's presence)

The figure of Zachie Achmat towers above the world of AIDS in South Africa. Co-founder of the Treatment Action Campaign, he was much more than its official chairperson: he literally embodied its struggle. A member of the African National Congress, he was engaged in the battle against apartheid. Echoing Chris Hani's famous prophecy of 1990 that AIDS would be the next challenge the country would face once the white supremacist regime was abolished, Achmat went from one fight to the next. Raised in a township designated for Colored people, being a gay activist and an AIDS patient, he is committed to his core to these different causes.

However, it is the Treatment Action Campaign that has won him national and international recognition. This organization initially fought the pharmaceutical industry because their medicines were financially inaccessible to the great majority of patients on the African continent, and later the government whose heterodox beliefs led to the blockage of the distribution of antiretroviral drugs in hospitals. The repertoire of actions of the Treatment Action Campaign was wide and provocative, making use of the street, the media, and the judicial system. Memorably, in the case they brought before the Pretoria High Court against the Health Minister in the name of the constitutional right to live, the judge obliged the government to implement without delay the effective prevention of mother-to-child transmission.²⁰ During all

the years of struggle, Achmat remarkably refused to take drugs that he was prescribed, affirming that he would only start his treatment when it would be available to all South Africans.

Far from being a passively endured tragedy, disease became an actively mobilized resource. Of his private suffering, Achmat was making a public cause. By placing his physical existence at stake, he was disrupting the supposed separation of the biological and the political. He was defending a biological citizenship that was also a political citizenship.²¹ Many of the struggles led during the 1990s and subsequent decade for access to health care in various parts of the world—from the health exception of the World Trade Organization in Doha to the medical aid of the state for undocumented immigrants in France—are examples of the numerous instances when life was used as a resource to obtain rights which certainly cannot be reduced to their biological dimension: because they are precisely rights and not obligations, they must also be regarded as political. Such struggles put democracy to the test as much as they enliven it. A reading that simplifies the politics of life eludes this dialectic, in which social agents are part and parcel.

Conclusion

Survival, in the sense Jacques Derrida attributed to the concept in his last interview, not only shifts lines that are too often hardened between biological and political lives: it opens an ethical space for reflection and action. Critical thinking in the past decade has often taken biopolitics and the politics of life as its objects. It has thus unveiled the way in which individuals and groups, even entire nations, have been treated by powers, the market, or the state, during the colonial period as well as in the contemporary era.

However, through indiscriminate extension, this powerful instrument has lost some of its analytical sharpness and heuristic potentiality. On the one hand, the binary reduction of life to the opposition between nature and history, bare life and qualified life, when systematically applied from philosophical inquiry in sociological or anthropological study, erases much of the complexity and richness of life in society as it is in fact observed. On the other hand, the normative prejudices which underlie the evaluation of the forms of life and of the politics of life, when generalized to an undifferentiated collection of social facts, end up by depriving social agents of legitimacy, voice, and action. The risk is therefore both scholarly and political. It calls for ethical attention.

In fact, the genealogy of this intellectual lineage reminds us that the main founders of these theories expressed tensions and hesitations in their work, which was often more complex, if even sometimes more obscure, than in its reduced and translated form in the humanities and social sciences today. And also biographies, here limited to fragments from South African lives that I have described and analyzed in more detail elsewhere, suggest the necessity of complicating the dualistic models that oppose biological and political lives. Certainly, powers like the market and the state do act sometimes as if human beings could be reduced to “mere life,” but democratic forces, including from within the structure of power, tend to produce alternative strategies that escape this reduction. And people themselves, even under conditions of domi-

nation, manage subtle tactics that transform their physical life into a political instrument or a moral resource or an affective expression.

But let us go one step further: ethnography invites us to reconsider what life is or rather what human beings make of their lives, and reciprocally how their lives permanently question what it is to be human. “The blurring between what is human and what is not human shades into the blurring over what is life and what is not life,” writes Veena Das. In the tracks of Wittgenstein and Cavell, she underscores that the usual manner in which we think of forms of life “not only obscures the mutual absorption of the natural and the social but also emphasizes form at the expense of life.”²² It should be the incessant effort of social scientists to return to this inquiry about life in its multiple forms but also in its everyday expression of the human.

NOTES

* This text began as a paper titled “Survivre” I wrote for the posthumous homage paid to Jacques Derrida on December 11, 2004, at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. It extends its initial honorific intention to engage a reflection around his last thoughts. I am grateful to Linda Garat for her thorough copy-editing of the manuscript.

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), I, 1253a, 28–29.
2. The concept of biopolitics appears in Michel Foucault’s work in the mid-1970s, most notably in the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978). I have shown that biopolitics as he conceived it had little to do with politics of life, in “La biopolitique n’est pas une politique de la vie,” *Sociologie et Sociétés* 38, no. 2 (2003): 35–48.
3. The interview was published in *Le Monde*, August 19, 2004, under the title “Je suis en guerre contre moi-même” (“I Am at War with Myself”). It was translated in English by Robert Knafo and appeared as *Jacques Derrida: The Last Interview* (New York: Studio Visit, 2004). The excerpts I cite are, however, my own—more literal—translation from the original text.
4. It is well known that the statement of “an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” has been quite controversial in Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 10.
5. It is remarkable that the only entry for “life” in the *Encyclopedia universalis* (Paris: Editions Encyclopedia Universalis, 1990) concerns the sole dimension of the living from the perspective of biological sciences, just as it is noticeable that the French *Dictionnaire d’éthique et de philosophie morale*, ed. Monique Canto-Sperber (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), has no entry for the word “life,” as if there was no ethical or moral dimension to the concept of life.
6. According to Canguilhem, it is necessary to differentiate “the present and past participles of the verb to live,” in other words, between “the living and the lived” (*le vivant et le vécu*). For Agamben, referring to Plato’s and Aristotle’s supposed distinction, *bios* is opposed to *zoē* as the “qualified life” to the “bare life.”
7. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 71.
8. Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1978), 299–300.
9. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 53–54, 108. As is well known, Arendt wrote the introduction to the English edition of Benjamin’s *Illuminations*.

10. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 96–97.
11. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 81, 1–8.
12. Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Atell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–8, citing Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, 259; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181–82.
13. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 133, 188, 202.
14. This is my more accurate translation from Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir: Histoire de la sexualité*, volume 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 214. Compare the current English translation: “power to foster life and disallow it to the point of death.” Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138.
15. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5.
16. Didier Fassin, “Another Politics of Life Is Possible” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, no. 5 (2009): 44–60.
17. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
18. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 143.
19. Fassin, *When Bodies Remember: Politics and Experiences of AIDS in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). The biographies evoked in the following pages are developed in more detail in the book.
20. The 1996 Constitution stipulates: “Everyone has the right to life” (Chapter 2: “Bill of Rights”, Section 11: “Life”). See <http://www.constitutionalcourt.org.za/site/theconstitution/english-09.pdf>.
21. The concept of biological citizenship has been proposed in Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), and expanded in Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
22. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 15.