

## BEARABLE LIFE

It is certainly one of the more satisfying moments of academic life when someone finds a concept you have developed useful. It is even more intellectually rewarding when those who find it useful critique it (in the academic sense), extend it and develop it, and do new things with it. So I cannot be more pleased to read these creative ethnographic pieces and be asked to write an afterword to them. While I will not directly engage the articles in any significant way, they have inspired what I have written and I hope it will speak to them in a productive way.

I am increasingly reflecting on the fact that, in the history of anthropology, there is always a dimension of the discipline's writings that is concerned with the question of 'viability'. That is, the various ways in which people around the world have defined to themselves what constitutes a 'viable culture' and what constitutes a 'viable life', a life that is worth living.

This is almost never tackled explicitly or systematically, yet one can discern an implicit conception of many social institutions as assemblages concerned with the definition, production, and distribution of the viable life. In such an existential economy people can inherit, or get distributed, more or less 'viability'. They can also inherit more or less efficient means of accumulating viability. While everyone is struggling to make their life viable, some have to struggle more than others and some have the means to struggle better than others. In this sense, one can think of Bourdieu's cultural economy as a theorisation of an economy of viability.

Clearly what constitutes viability differs, sometimes radically so, in various contexts:

it can involve a conception of an exciting ever-changing life on the go as well as the conception of 'Istikrar/stability' mobilised productively by Samuli Schielke. But one can still find commonalities in that diversity that are able to steer us towards that grand mythical 'unity of humankind'. It could be the case that the concept of 'existential mobility' is one of the 'currencies' that get accumulated in these existential economies of viability, and that change in various contexts while also pointing to such commonalities. We can easily establish, for instance, that today there is a vigorous *existential* struggle over what constitutes a viable economy that allows us to 'go somewhere' collectively. To put it simply there is a struggle between the inherited conception of economic viability as never ending growth and productivity and the ecologically conscious conception of viability as sustainability. This conflict over the two conceptions of viability can hardly be seen as 'purely' economic. In fact, it can be said that viability here as elsewhere is very much a 'total' social fact in Marcel Mauss' sense. It is at the same time economic, material, symbolic, social, political, affective, etc. Indeed it is the fact that it is this totality that makes it an existential fact. This is also true of the 'totality' that is at stake in the struggle over what constitutes a viable life as it is articulated to the struggle over viable economies described above. Here we have opposed on one hand a life where existential mobility is conceived of primarily in terms of accumulation of wealth and commodities and fossil fuel-dependent comfort regardless of what consequences such comfort has on the environment, and on the other hand a viable life that sees environmental care and

the promotion of sustainability as key to one's sense of 'going places'.

But just as there is an existential economy, there is also an existential governmentality. A governmentality that is a politics of viability is different from a bio-politics precisely because viability is a total social fact. Existential governmentality is *not only* concerned with the things bio-politics is interested in, but also with regulating the distribution of satisfaction, agency, waiting, hope, coping capacities, and indeed, mobility and stasis, agitation and restfulness, etc. This speaks to Fassin's critique of bio-politics that Annika Lems makes good use of in her paper. It is here that I have thought of a category that could perhaps speak productively to some of the key concerns that seem to me present in the three papers: the concerns for existence amidst a dialectic of mobility and confinement, motion and rest, freedom and incarceration, and agency and coercion.

It seems to me that one of the key defining features of neo-liberal existential governmentality of marginalised people today is a minimalist definition of viability which is indeed akin to the viability produced within places of confinement such as prisons: a figure that hovers explicitly or implicitly over all three papers. Let me put with a play on words what I hope ends up being a meaningful point. If for Agamben's conception of bio-politics the concentration camp offers us the imaginary origins of the neo-liberal concern with the sacrificial 'bare life', for my conception of existential politics it is the prison and the practices of confinements that offer us the origins of the neo-liberal imaginary of the viable life: here rather than 'bare' life the key problematic is that of the 'bearable' life.

The bearable life is the figure that emerges in the government of prisons, but also in prison-like places like Gaza, or in the detention camps

where asylum seekers are left such as on Manus. These should not be mistaken for spaces of extermination that problematize 'bare life' as concentration camps do. The bearable life is a viable life, but it can be seen as the product of a search for the absolutely minimally-viable life, the just-bearable life.

One of the earliest design problems in the history of caging which highlights the problematic of the bearable life presented itself in bird cages, and had to do with the unbearable over-visibility of the cage. Birds in highly visible cages, where the bars were too thick, for instance, found them unbearable and kept trying to break free by flying straight into them, and ended up hurting themselves and dying. Technically then, the history of refining cages is one of creating something strong enough to ensure the encaged does not break free, while also ensuring that this search for strength does not result in an unbearable 'in your face' over-visibility that leads to their death. The bearable life then is the life that is constantly hovering between the viable and non-viable, between the life that is worth living and the life that is not.<sup>1</sup> While, because of this hovering, the question of suicide is always present (one wonders how this connects to the problematic of suicide in Lems' paper), prison governmentality does not aim generally for the production of mass suicide but it makes people live on the line where they can easily tip into it if not well managed. Unless the incarceration is specifically designed to kill as in some colonial contexts, in prison, a suicide is, like an enjoyable life, the product of bad government. The bearable life is located between the two: the viable subject should neither enjoy themselves too much nor commit suicide. It is an abject version of Michael Jackson's 'life within limits' mentioned in the papers.

It seems to me that the way, in the papers above, we are dealing with realities

haunted by the spectre of imprisonment (that spectre is less explicit but not totally absent in Reeves' governmental queue), highlights the problematic of 'the bearable life' that neo-liberal governmentality is fostering among marginalised subjects today. Even if not explicitly, of course, I like to think that the social subjects portrayed in those papers highlight and inform us about the ways the struggle for viability/existential mobility in these neo-liberal times, takes the form of a struggle against the 'bearable life' that the state distributes to them and where it wishes them to remain stuck. That is, they are continuously struggling against the descent into a non-viable life as they are located close enough to it to be haunted by its presence,

and also struggling to move from the domain of bearability to that of viability proper where life can also be enjoyed.

## NOTES

- 1 Behrooz Boochari's book, *No Friend but The Mountain*, captures this continual hovering dramatically and with precision, but also with what is, appropriately, a highly affective language.

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