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VULNERABILITY

A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE*

RÉSUMÉ

Le concept de vulnérabilité connaît un succès exponentiel sans que ses contours soient réellement circonscrits. Une approche dynamique, celle des parcours de vie, contribue à lui donner un sens à la fois théorique et concret. Cet article s'interrogera en premier lieu sur les facteurs qui font de la vulnérabilité un mot fétiche en ce début du 21^e siècle. Dans un deuxième temps, en s'appuyant sur le paradigme interdisciplinaire du parcours de vie, les processus de vulnérabilisation seront considérés.

MOTS CLÉS : *Vulnérabilité, Accumulation de désavantage, Biographisation, Exclusion.*

ABSTRACT

The concept of vulnerability has recently known a terrific success while (or maybe because) it remains vague. A dynamic approach, the life course perspective, contributes to a theoretical discussion supporting empirical investigations. This paper considers first why vulnerability provokes so much interest, then analyses the processes of vulnerabilisation through the prism of the interdisciplinary life course paradigm.

KEYWORDS : *Vulnerability, Accumulation of Disadvantage, Biographisation, Exclusion.*

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The concept of vulnerability emerged from the study of natural disasters, where it was used to express their on-the-whole not very natural nature and the impossibility of understanding them without a holistic perspective including socio-economic and political dimensions such as urban planning, infrastructure, governance, etc.¹ This original approach implies, from the outset, a dynamic, processual vision, an explicit acceptance of complexity and of the effects of interaction, as well as a notion familiar to demographers, the dissociation between exposure to a risk and the occurrence of that risk. Research on vulnerability has slowly spread, in particular to biomedical and engineering sciences, but generally for a long time it remained rare and confined before recently spreading to an impressive degree, with vulnerability becoming a buzz word of the 21st century,² one of the dominant concepts in the vast and composite field of social science. Both Axelle Brodriez-Dolino and the author of this paper have, in French and English respectively, counted the occurrences of the word in *Google Scholar* and have shown the extent, at once approximate and obvious, of a latent low-intensity interest, a rise in interest in the 1990s, then a veritable explosion in the last fifteen years.³

In this article, we discuss the explanations of this boom, which are connected to a strong social demand in a specific historical context, but also to the vague and even catch-all nature of this concept. To attempt to move studies on vulnerability towards a more structured or at least more cumulative form of knowledge, we will use, in a second section, the contributions of the life course perspective. The conclusion dissociates inequalities and vulnerabilities and assumes risk-taking by proposing a few definitions.

I - VULNERABILITY: A CONTROVERSIAL CONCEPT THAT IS A TREMENDOUS SUCCESS

The growth in research work using the concept of vulnerability is reminiscent of the contrast, both real and often exaggerated, both in the popular imagination and by politicians and scientists, between two socio-historical periods: the *Trente Glorieuses*, post-war economic boom time, and the period which began with the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 and is continuing to play out to this day. The years after the Second World War, with the setting up of the welfare state, economic growth, full employment and the rise of the consumer society appear positive in every respect, while, for example, poverty among the

1 E. Schröder-Butterfill, R. Marianti, "A framework for understanding old-age vulnerabilities", *Ageing & Society*, 26, 2006, no. 1, p. 9-35.

2 A. Brodriez-Dolino, «Le concept de vulnérabilité», *La vie des idées*, 11 February 2016.

3 A. Brodriez-Dolino, «La vulnérabilité, nouvelle catégorie de l'action publique», *Informations sociales* 2015/2, no. 188) p. 12; M. Oris, Michel, C. Roberts, D. Joye, M. Ernst-Stähli, «Surveying human vulnerabilities across the life course: an introduction», In Oris, Michel, Roberts, Caroline, Joye, Dominique, Ernst-Stähli, Michèle (eds.), *Surveying Human Vulnerabilities across the Life Course*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2016, p. 5.

elderly remained high.⁴ For Martin Kohli, this period, also marked by a boom in marriage and births (the baby boom years), low rates of divorce and illegitimate birth, associated the increased security of existence with an institutionalised organisation of life's different stages (childhood, adulthood, old age), each being strictly associated with specific roles and functions and with clear and rapid transitions from one stage to the next. The overall picture was transparent and reassuring.⁵ For all that, this was quite a short, and truth be told exceptional period. It serves all the more to highlight the ambivalence of recent changes in populations that overall remain the most affluent on the planet. These changes also stand out because all the dimensions of life are affected. In particular, demographers are observing the "second demographic transition", which is hardly demographic since it involves much more a fragilisation of relationships between couples, a diversification in family forms, and more generally, the ways of "doing family". The employment market has, for its part, been transformed by globalisation, deindustrialisation, the dualisation of social positions in the tertiary economy and the rise of flexibility. The protective institutions, in particular the Welfare State, are being criticised and are regressing⁶. It is against this background that in Grenoble in 1997 sociologist Pierre Bourdieu stated that "today, precariousness is everywhere".⁷

At the same time, the groundswell of individualisation is changing the reference points in the "risk society".⁸ A new normative figure is imposing itself, the autonomous, responsible individual, implying according to Honneth a "promise of freedom" supporting an "ideology of de-institutionalisation".⁹ Denouncing the perception of the vulnerable as the counter-model of this ideal, Hélène Thomas even considers the concept of vulnerability as a "neo-liberal sponge". However, the institutions do not seem to be disappearing; they could be seen to be taking on even more power by subordinating their support to more injunctions, and even orders, in the governance of fragile individuals.¹⁰ "The approaches through vulnerability are also part of a general evolution (...) that places the emphasis on individuals' ability to serve as relays for public action".¹¹ In particular, the so-called activation policies aim, through ad hoc programmes, to give vulnerable people the resources they are lacking, which tend to include psychological traits such as motivation, personal discipline,

4 S. Paugam, *La disqualification sociale: Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1991.

5 M. Kohli, "The institutionalization of the life course: Looking back to look ahead", *Research in Human Development*, 4, 2007, p. 253-271.

6 M. Oris et al., «Surveying human vulnerabilities... op. cit.

7 P. Bourdieu, «La précarité est aujourd'hui partout», *Contre-feux*, édition Raison d'agir, 1998, p. 95-100.

8 U. Beck. *Risk society: towards a new modernity*. London, Sage, 1992.

9 A. Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization Some Paradoxes of Individualization", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7, 2004, no. , p. 463; M. Baeriswyl, *Participations et rôles sociaux à l'âge de la retraite*, Doctoral thesis (Socio-economics) at the University of Geneva, 2016, p. 274.

10 L. Leisering, "Government and the life course", In J.T. Mortimer, M.J. Shanahan (eds.), *Handbook of the life course*. New York, Springer Verlag, 2003, p. 205-225.

11 M. Bresson, V. Geronimi, N. Pottier, *La vulnérabilité : questions de recherche en sciences sociales*, Fribourg, Academic Press, 2013, p. 16.

etc.¹² This “psychologisation of social issues”, in particular through a reflection on risk factors close to that of epidemiology, has re-invigorated an old tradition, the pathologisation of social issues, which was already prevalent in the 19th century, but also in the work done in the 1980s and 90s on exclusion.¹³ This is echoed in the scientific world, on an undeniable substrate of good intentions, in the programme launched by the ANR (national research agency) in 2008 on “social and health-related vulnerabilities”.¹⁴

Doris Hanappi and her colleagues have recently dug more systematically into this question of the uses of the concept through an analysis of the content of 10,632 abstracts published since 2000. Vulnerability appears in combination with some thirty other, more or less specific themes, ranging – to cite only two examples – from personality disorders to female single parenthood. A factor analysis situates vulnerability in a central position at the nexus of a main axis that opposes psychology and sociology/demographics and a secondary axis along which lie studies of the stages of life, in particular *youth studies* and the study of old age (gerontology), manifestly perceived as being specifically risky.¹⁵ Vulnerability is, furthermore, close to a twin, but opposing concept of resilience, another word whose usage was once confined (to the psychopathology of trauma) but has recently exploded. Both turn on the idea of individual well-being, threatened or restored. As singular as this may seem in the contemporary context, well-being as a personal objective has no absolute, timeless value. “Collinet and Delalandre show (...) how well-being became a political aim over the course of the second half of the 20th century, then how subjective well-being as self-realisation emerged at the end of the 1990s”.¹⁶ There is therefore a general set of reference points that has imposed itself on scientific attention at the beginning of the 21st century.

My aim here is to insist on one point: the spectacular rise in the study of vulnerability reflects much more than a “fashion” in intellectual milieus. There is a cradle effect at work, with researchers responding to a social demand, to the interests of our time. To some extent this is a truism, but it is also the most important challenge facing researchers working in this field, since understanding one’s world necessarily implies both taking an interest in it and distancing oneself from it; the corollary to this is that there is an obvious risk of political instrumentalisation. To deal with that risk, borrowing from philosophy or

12 See in particular, J.M. Bonvin, H.U. Otto, H. Ziegler, “Towards a more critical appraisal of social policies? The contribution of the capability approach”, In *Critical Social Policy and the Capability Approach*, Opladen and Farmington Hills, Barbara Budrich, 2014, p. 231-248.

13 Cl. Martin, «Penser la vulnérabilité. Les apports de Robert Castel», *Alter: European Journal of Disability Research/Alter: Journal Européen de Recherche sur le Handicap*, 2013, 7 (4), p.293-298.

14 H. Thomas, «Vulnérabilité, fragilité, précarité, résilience, etc. De l’usage et de la traduction de notions éponges en sciences de l’homme et de la vie», *Esquisses*, 23, 2008, p. 1-37; Idem, *Les vulnérables, la démocratie contre les pauvres*, Bellecombes-en-Bauges, Editions du Croquant, 2010.

15 D. Hanappi, L. Bernardi, D. Spini, “Vulnerability as a heuristic concept for interdisciplinary research: assessing the thematic and methodological structure of empirical life course studies”, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 6, 2015, (1), pp. 1-29.

16 M. Baeriswyl, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274, which relies on C. Collinet & M. Delalandre, «L’injonction au bien-être dans les programmes de prévention du vieillissement», *L’Année sociologique*, 64 2014, (2), pp. 445-467. It should be noted, furthermore, that in Google Scholar, the expression “well-being” in its various spellings, follows exactly the same chronological development as the word “vulnerability”, the recent explosion in interest in one applying equally to the other.

gerontology, several researchers have taken as their starting point the observation of the intrinsic vulnerability of all human beings, all of them being frail *in fine*,¹⁷ which is supposed to prevent stigmatisation - we will return to this.

The interweaving of the psychological, sociological and medical (or pathological) dimensions in a society of individuals, for its part, calls for an interdisciplinarity that the vagueness surrounding the concept of vulnerability at once facilitates and cripples. Facilitates because this is a portmanteau word on which everyone hangs whatever they want and which belongs to no-one, thereby guaranteeing its success across the disciplines. Cripples because the frameworks imposed by the academic disciplines are so full of meaning and restricting that it is difficult to get them into a dialogue to construct the holistic, dynamic approach that was already promoted in the studies on "natural" disasters and which remains, more than ever, necessary to understand human vulnerabilities. In this respect, the following section aims to help remove a few obstacles and propose an approach. The aim is in no way to bring order to creative chaos by imposing a definition. It is more a case, starting from the obvious observation that the theorisation remains weak, of showing how the life course perspective offers a heuristic option to move forward more efficiently towards a more cumulative knowledge on human vulnerabilities.

II - VULNERABILITIES IN THE LIFE COURSE

Emerging in the 1970s and asserting itself in the 1980s, the life course approach is more a perspective than a specific, closed set of theories. It explores the articulation of individual and historical temporalities (biographies in history, the dimensions of life (family life, professional life, leisure, commitments, etc.) taking the individual as the unit of analysis. Yet for all that, this individualism is methodological and not substantial as connected lives (couples, parenthood, sibling relationships, but also friendships and generally any form of social ties) are also an important component, as are the effects of context, spatial or temporal. The study of life trajectories or courses relies on longitudinal data, which can be quantitative or qualitative and shed light on objective realities or subjective perceptions. It takes on substantially different tonalities in Europe and in North America and benefits from a long tradition of dialogue, which has, however, been difficult and even risky, between a strong sociological current and a powerful orientation towards developmental psychology, *life span psychology*.¹⁸ Due to all these aspects, it is a good candidate - but surely not the only one - for founding a heuristic for studying vulnerabilities, which places the emphasis on their construction over time, which necessarily implies integrating resilience into the analyses. In the rest of this section, I will look mainly at the elements of temporality, thereby neglecting other dimensions that are no less relevant, relational vulnerability in particular.

In the life course perspective, birth is so to speak the obligatory starting point, but all the family time prior to its occurrence overshadows the baby's cot, defining its birth order and therefore its position among the siblings, as well as the generational distance between it and its parents. The newborn will immediately be characterised by gender, skin

17 A. Brodriez-Dolino, «La vulnérabilité...» *op. cit.*, p. 13.

18 M. Oris, C. Ludwig, A. de Ribaupierre, D. Joye, D. Spini (éds.), *Linked lives and self-regulation. Life span - life course: is it really the same?*, special issue of *Advances in Life Course Research*, 14, 2009 (1-2), 81 p.

colour, ethnic origin, all of them being traits liable to be used as factors of discrimination. It also receives from its parents a socio-economic status which has many implications in terms of diet, housing, preventive and curative practices in case of health problems, etc. Psychologists, focused in particular on emotional and cognitive capital, qualify these early years as a *critical life period*. Epidemiologists and demographers think along the same lines, demonstrating that living conditions in childhood have deferred effects significantly affecting longevity decades later, in adulthood and old age. In sociology, major schools of thought, from Marx and Weber to functionalism, have analysed the link between individual's initial characteristics and the probability of acquiring resources later in life, a link resulting in the dominance of intergenerational social reproduction.¹⁹

Life course studies have enriched our understanding of the processes at work up to a point. One school of thought has confronted the theories of social causality (our health is poor because we come from a working-class background) and of selection (health problems have led to poor educational performance resulting in a low socio-economic position) to conclude that the first interpretation dominates at the beginning of life and that dynamic interrelationships are established subsequently.²⁰ In developmental psychology, the cognitive reserve hypotheses (roughly associated with educational level) at the end of childhood and the use of cognition during adulthood (intellectual profession or not depending on training) are used to explain social inequalities in the occurrence of neuro-degenerative illnesses in old age.²¹ But the most famous approach is unquestionably the theory of cumulative (dis)advantage, which has acquired great resonance since the 1980s. It assumes that within the same birth cohort, small differences in childhood are enough to initiate more and more diverging life trajectories as time goes by,²² making the population of young retirees the most diverse and the most heterogeneous there is.

At this stage of development, life seems in a manner of speaking to be determined to a hopeless extent, leaving almost no room for individual action to overcome one's initial condition. This point cannot be spontaneously rejected. In terms of economic vulnerability, in a rich country like Switzerland, where poverty affects no less than just over one in five pensioners, the probability of being in this difficult situation is four times higher in those who completed only the minimum compulsory education compared to those with a higher education qualification. A human capital acquired early in life has conditioned a deep gradient of inequality half a century or more later, in the life course of the people in question.²³ Yet, if a third of pensioners with a low educational level have an income just above the poverty line, another fifth have monthly incomes allowing them to lead an entirely secure existence. There is therefore a strong predictive power and at the same

19 M. Oris et al., "Surveying human vulnerabilities..." *op. cit.*

20 J.D. McLeod, E.K. Pavalko, "From selection effects to reciprocal processes: What does attention to the life course offer?" *Advances in Life Course Research*, 13, 2008, 75-104.

21 A. Ihle, M. Oris, D. Fagot, M. Baeriswyl, E. Guichard, M. Kliegel, "The association of leisure activities in middle adulthood with cognitive performance in old age: The moderating role of educational level", *Gerontology*, 61, 2015, (6), p. 543-550.

22 T.A. DiPrete, G.M. Eirich, "Cumulative advantage as a mechanism for inequality: a review of theoretical and empirical developments", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 32, 2006, p. 271-297.

23 R. Gabriel, M. Oris, Michel, M. Studer, M. Baeriswyl, "The persistence of social stratification? A life course perspective on old-age poverty in Switzerland", *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 41, 2015 (3), p. 465-487.

time some significant exceptions. The observation of those exceptions in many studies on different areas of life, has led to the conclusion that in spite of the success of the theory of cumulative disadvantage in scientific circles, “*there is surprisingly little evidence for cumulative processes*” and “*a wide variety of model specifications remain completely untested*”.²⁴ Markus Schafer and his co-authors go further and draw a question from these findings: when (why) do inequalities (vulnerabilities) not accumulate?²⁵ More generally, why do trajectories converge or diverge?

One of the most famous pioneers of life course studies, the American Glen Elder, in his ground-laying book on the “children of the Great Depression”, showed how growing up during a major crisis could mark the destiny of a group that this shared history endowed with a collective memory, making it a socio-historical generation in the sense given it by Mannheim.²⁶ Elder thus made an important contribution to research on vulnerability and resilience, well before they became popular subjects.²⁷ First of all at a macro level, in a perspective that was at once historical and institutional, he enriched the conceptual palette by highlighting the importance of the *life stage*, which defines the age of the members of a birth cohort at the time when a major change or socio-historical event occurs.²⁸ In Elder’s study, the event was the Depression, but also a little later in their existence the Second World War, which mobilised young men, and the (many) survivors then benefited from the “GI Bill” which enabled them to get a higher education that equipped them to enter the job market during the post-war boom years and frequently enabled them to become upwardly mobile socially. All in all, the change will only modify the trajectory of the members of a birth cohort if it occurs when they have the right age at the time. Funded pension schemes offer another, particularly illustrative example. A new system such as the Swiss Second Pillar, introduced late on, in 1985, takes several decades to take full effect as it is necessary to have completed a full career to get a full pension. A survey offering a snapshot of the situation in 2011/12 therefore revealed a high level of age stratification of poverty, much more frequent in older people who were too far into their professional life when the reform was introduced.²⁹ In this sense, the meeting of history with age groups is liable to create strong inter-cohort disparities, both positive and negative.³⁰

24 G. Elder, M. Shanahan, J. Jennings, “Human development in time and place”, In R.M. Lerhner (ed.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science*, Hoboken, Wiley, 2015, p. 23.

25 M.H. Schafer, T. Shippie, K.F. Ferraro, “When does disadvantage not accumulate? Toward a sociological conceptualization of resilience”, *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 35, 2009, (2), p. 231-251.

26 K. Mannheim (1952). “The problem of generations”, In P. Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge*, London, Routledge, p. 276-322.

27 Gl. Elder, *Children of the great depression (25th anniversary ed.)*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999 (1974).

28 M. Shanahan, R. Macmillan, *Biography and the sociological imagination: Contexts and contingencies*, New York, Norton, 2008, p. 58.

29 R. Gabriel et al., *op. cit.*

30 Reading these lines, demographers will think of the Age-Period-Cohort model, which is in fact experiencing a new lease of life. See in particular L. Chauvel, «Spécificités et permanence des effets de contexte : le modèle APCD appliqué aux inégalités de générations, France/Etats-Unis, 1985-2010», *Revue française de Sociologie*, 54, 2013, (4), p. 665-705, which goes as far as to refer to generational «scarring effects».

To consider the diversity within a given cohort, we can rely on a proposed linear modelling of vulnerability which has aroused a great deal of interest. Elisabeth Schröder-Butterfill and Ruly Marianti, building on the natural disaster studies, dissociate exposure to risk, then the occurrence of the risk and then the resulting state.³¹ As do these two authors, to whom we remain indebted, we need to explain the content of the three stages. In the initial stage we have an individual endowed with various items of economic, social, personality and health-related capital, etc. all of which together form a system of resources. It is at this level that the question of the existence of latent state of vulnerability arises. When he analyses “the dynamics of marginalisation processes: from vulnerability to disaffiliation”, Robert Castel considers vulnerability as the initial latent state, distinct from the result, namely here disaffiliation.³² In actual fact, in processual terms, marginalisation corresponds to a situation of exposure to additional and/or new risks, according to a dynamic commonly known as a “vicious circle”.

By latent state of vulnerability, we are referring to the more or less generalised, more or less localised deficiencies in resources that increase the probability that the risk will occur and/or reduce the capacity to cope with the risk. In this sense, the relationship between the initial situation and the risk is not a one-way, but a two-way relationship and is more a matter of interaction than a simple linear temporal sequence. This is all the more so when the risk can vary considerably in nature and intensity according to when it occurs in the life trajectory of the individual affected. It can be, for example, a sudden shock in one of the dimensions of life, such as the unexpected loss of a loved one, or a situation of stress at work spread over a long period.³³

In any case, the dynamics of vulnerabilisation and resilience which will determine life trajectories and well-being depend on the unequal distribution of both resources and risks. But the outgoing state is, for all that, not the so to speak mathematical result: it depends largely on individuals’ capacity for³⁴ what psychologists call *coping*.³⁵ We still know very little about the factors that lead some individuals not to use the resources that they have at their disposal, or to remain paralysed in the face of the life accident that happens to them, whereas others actively put together responses, including by mobilising those around them. Here there is an obvious need to enter into a dialogue with psychologists, in particular those working on the feeling of control over one’s life³⁶ or on the ability to recompose the aims of one’s existence when circumstances change.³⁷ As things stand, after being confronted with the risk, the individual can 1) come out of it weaker, or even broken, and enter a vicious circle of losses that pile up, or 2) remain stable – and it should be forgotten that this will

31 E. Schröder-Butterfill, R. Marianti, *op. cit.*

32 R. Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale. Une chronique du salariat*, Paris, Fayard, 1995.

33 M. Oris et al., «Surveying human vulnerabilities...» *op. cit.*

34 M.-H. Soulet, «Faire face et s’en sortir. Vers une théorie de l’agir faible», in V. Châtel, M.-H. Soulet (éds), *Agir en situation de vulnérabilité*, Québec, Presses de l’Université Laval, 2003, p. 167-214.

35 E. Schröder-Butterfill, R. Marianti, *op. cit.*

36 L. Pearlin, M. Pioli, “Personal control: Some conceptual turf and future directions”, In S.H. Zarit, L. Pearlin, S.K. Warner (eds), *Personal control in social and life course contexts*, New York, Springer, 2003, p. 1-21.

37 J. Brandtstädter, “Goal pursuit and goal adjustment: self-regulation and intentional self-development in changing developmental contexts”, *Advances in Life Course Research*, 14, 2009, p. 52-62.

have required a considerable amount of effort³⁸ –, or 3) have been “forged by the ordeal” to borrow the term used by Danilo Martucelli.³⁹ This diversity of resulting states shows a high level of inter-individual variability. It underlines the necessity to conceive vulnerability trajectories in probabilistic and not deterministic terms.

This does not mean, for all that, that there is no interpretative framework. The life course approach emphasises that transitions, which take the form of changes in status and roles, and therefore of personal identity, are moments when the risks of vulnerabilisation are heightened. A rich vocabulary (new directions, turning points, splits, crises and life accidents) expresses the diversity of these transitions, which range from brutally sudden to gradual, from expected to unforeseeable. They may be imposed on the individual or come in the form of a crossroad involving more or less restrictive, more or less free choices and the stress that goes with them. Transitions are most often associated with an event (sometimes several), but not always (the realisation that one has grown old, for example without it necessarily being precipitated by a particular incident). Some are critical, affecting significantly the direction of a life, creating an irreversible situation; others will barely impact the individual’s consciousness. All these distinctions will differentiate the subsequent impacts on the life course, but there is one that is of very particular interest as it connects the individual to the collective: this is the difference between normative and non-normative transitions. The former, regularly associated with rites of passage managed by institutions, respond to widely shared social representations of what the stages of life are and what the right moment for them is. Typically, at least until the 1960s, there was a *proper age at marriage*, below which one could be pregnant and pushed into a shotgun wedding and above which one became a “spinster”. More recently in France, the expression “Tanguy” has emerged to refer to men who stay at home with their parents for too long. As these examples show, varying degrees of stigma are attached to situations that fall outside the norm.⁴⁰

Originally, life course research work focused on each transition separately, using appropriate statistical tools (longitudinal multivariate analysis, often known in France as “biography analysis”). Starting from the pioneering work done by Abott, the study of life sequences, and even of the overall structure of trajectories, has made it possible to situate the transitions in the general scheme of existence.⁴¹ The methodological advances provide researchers with answers to their questions on destandardisation. Compared to the predominant order during the years following the Second World War, post-modern

38 D. Spini, D. Hanappi, L. Bernardi, M. Oris, J.-Fr. Bickel (2013), “Vulnerability across the life course: a theoretical framework and research directions”, *Working Papers LIVES*, 27, 2013.

39 D. Martucelli, *Forgé par l'épreuve. L'individu dans la France contemporaine*, Paris, A. Colin, 2006.

40 For this paragraph I am indebted to Aude Martenot. Among the abundant literature that she synthesises in her ongoing thesis, we will mention only M. Bessin, C. Bidart, M. Grossetti, *Bifurcations: les sciences sociales face aux ruptures et à l'événement*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010; C. Laborde, E. Lelièvre, G. Vivier, «Trajectoires et événements marquants, comment dire sa vie? Une analyse des faits et des perceptions biographiques», in C. Bonvalet, E. Lelièvre (éds.), *De la famille à l'entourage. L'enquête Biographies et entourage*, Paris, INED, 2012 ; Ph. Cordazzo, B. Fichet, *Transition, passage en sciences sociales*, Strasbourg, Néothèque, 2014.

41 G. Ritschard, M. Oris, “Life course data in demography and social sciences: statistical and data-mining approaches”, in R. Levy, P. Ghisletta, J.-M. Le Goff, D. Spini, E. Widmer (eds.), *Towards an interdisciplinary perspective on the life course*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 2005, p. 283-314.

societies are supposedly creating more “turbulent” lives, with a desynchronisation and dechronologisation of the events. For example, having a child before being married, or not getting married at all. More generally, the ages of life and their sequencing are being called into question, with retirement no longer being equated with old age and the transition to adulthood appearing to become more turbulent, longer and more complex, more uncertain also, to the point where the transition from studenthood to the employment market is looking like a new “critical life period”.⁴² Without disputing the reality of such changes, their scale has been the subject of some sceptical appreciation,⁴³ with empirical studies revealing situations that vary from country to country and are to a large extent dependent on the different forms of involvement of the welfare state.⁴⁴

If more work is required to take things further, it is important that this work should integrate the non-transitions, those that are absent from individuals’ life calendars, or failed transitions, such as failing the baccalaureate, with the former and the latter sometimes being one and the same. Research in this field will enable a more systematic testing of an interpretation that has emerged recently of a dialogue between the life course approach and poverty studies: the biographisation hypothesis. Situated within the framework of post-modern societies, societies of the individuals, it places less social stigma on individual failure, first of all due to its frequency. One foundation of this approach, moreover, is the concept of “democratisation of risk” taken from the work of the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck.⁴⁵ Everyone, including the better-off, is faced with the risk of family breakdown, career change, the reorientation of one’s life after going through difficult times. Coping with these things reinforces self-esteem and gives the individual a capital of experience to enable him/her to cope with other delicate stages later in life. In this vision, poverty would be less structural, less irreversible as entrenched in the deterministic effects of social reproduction, but more and more often a temporary episode in one’s life due to life accidents,⁴⁶ the succession of falls and self-reconstructions giving life the pattern of a roller-coaster, with ups and down subject to limited turbulence where only the failure to bounce back would be a source of stigma. It remains a delicate matter to test this interpretation. It is true, for example, being a divorced woman was stigmatising in the 1950s, but the rise in the frequency of divorce has normalised this transition and the resulting state. Yet, as we have briefly mentioned, divorce remains a risk factor for poverty for women with dependent children, children who

42 L. Chauvel, “The long-term destabilization of youth, scarring effects and the future of the welfare regime in post-Trente Glorieuses France”, *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 23, 2010, 74-96.

43 H. Brückner, K.U. Mayer, “De-Standardization of the Life Course: What it Might Mean? And if it Means Anything, Whether it Actually Took Place? ”, *Advances in Life Course Research*, 9, 2005, p. 27-53.

44 L. Lesnard, A.S. Cousteaux, V. Le Hay, Fl. Chanvrlil, «Trajectoires d’entrée dans l’âge adulte et États-providence», *Informations sociales*, 3, 2011. (165-166), p. 16-24.

45 U. Beck, *op. cit.*

46 L. Vandecasteele, “Life course risks or cumulative disadvantage? The structuring effect of social stratification determinants and life course events on poverty transitions in Europe”, *European Sociological Review*, 27, 2011, p. 246-263; C. Dewilde, “A life-course perspective on social exclusion and poverty”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 54, 2003, p. 109-128.

are, furthermore, more than their parents, the focus of socio-political discourse concerned with the consequences of their life conditions on their future.⁴⁷

CONCLUSIONS

The developments above contain numerous implicit ones that it is important to admit and discuss. In many respects, I have approached the construction of vulnerabilities through the life course as a construction of inequalities between and within birth cohorts. This is justified in many respect, but all the same it does not concern the same order of reality. Transforming differences into inequalities is not the inevitable destiny of humanity – or at least I would like to believe it is not – but latent vulnerability such as exposure to risk is the natural condition of humans, as mortal beings. A state of vulnerability can also be “realised” (constructed) and “evident” when it is institutionally, normatively and socially recognised as such. This is, to take a few diverse examples, the case of the homeless, refugees, the long-term unemployed, the profoundly depressed, etc. These markers of vulnerability when they are the subject of a wide consensus, serve to define vulnerable individuals and groups, an approach that is often criticised as qualification can generate discouragement or shame among those designated and their stigmatisation by others, namely another form of cumulative disadvantage. This practice remains common nonetheless, in particular among demographers who circumscribe sub-populations in this way, or in social policies and their legal expressions. The groups defined in this way then become formal categories (for example in definitions of disability or having an income below a given threshold, i.e. the poverty line, both being conditions for accessing social benefits). If the marker of vulnerability can be associated with a legal norm, it can also be a matter of general normativity (value judgments), or even both. For example, the social representations of migrant women include vulnerabilities that are somewhat different to those of migrant men. The “evident” nature is profoundly dependent on the context, in historical and spatial terms, which is translated into the development and diversity of norms.

In this vision, which is not intended to be unanimously accepted, inequality is linked to measurable objectives realities considering the distribution of capital or resources. As for vulnerability, it appears as a judgment of the person and their situation by their social and institutional environment. Vulnerability is also a condition experienced subjectively by the individual.⁴⁸ The articulation of these two components is crucial, for if there is a discrepancy of appreciation between the psychological and the normative, the risk then arises of disaffiliation.

Analytically, one or more states of vulnerability may be observed at any one time situated temporally on the life course, which as a whole consists of a sequence of states. Overall, a life trajectory can be defined as a multidimensional process partly undetermined (subject to life accidents), but *path-dependent* (earlier life course) and context-dependent. Life can be seen as a series of sequences of latent states and “realised” or “evident” states

47 J.M. Falter, «Le divorce, facteur de pauvreté féminine», in M. Oris et al., *La construction des inégalités à travers le parcours de vie*, Lausanne, Presses Polytechniques Universitaires Romandes, 2009, p. 297-314.

48 Which include the possibility of denial, for example the denial of ageing studied by V. Caradec, *Sociologie de la vieillesse et du vieillissement*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2008.

of vulnerability. Research then focuses on the latter based on the former, dependency on earlier life not necessarily being linear as some moments in life can be more crucial than others, some transitions more decisive. In addition, the effect of the past on the rest of one's destiny is expressed in probabilistic and not strictly deterministic terms; it is necessary to explore - with a certain ambition, but also a certain humility - the causalities of the probable. When we apply such a model to research on vulnerability, we study the processes by which people "fall or fail, but can also resist, surpass themselves and even "grow"".49

49 D. Spini, D. Hanappi, L. Bernardi, M. Oris, J.-Fr. Bickel, "Vulnerability across the life course... *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 7.

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