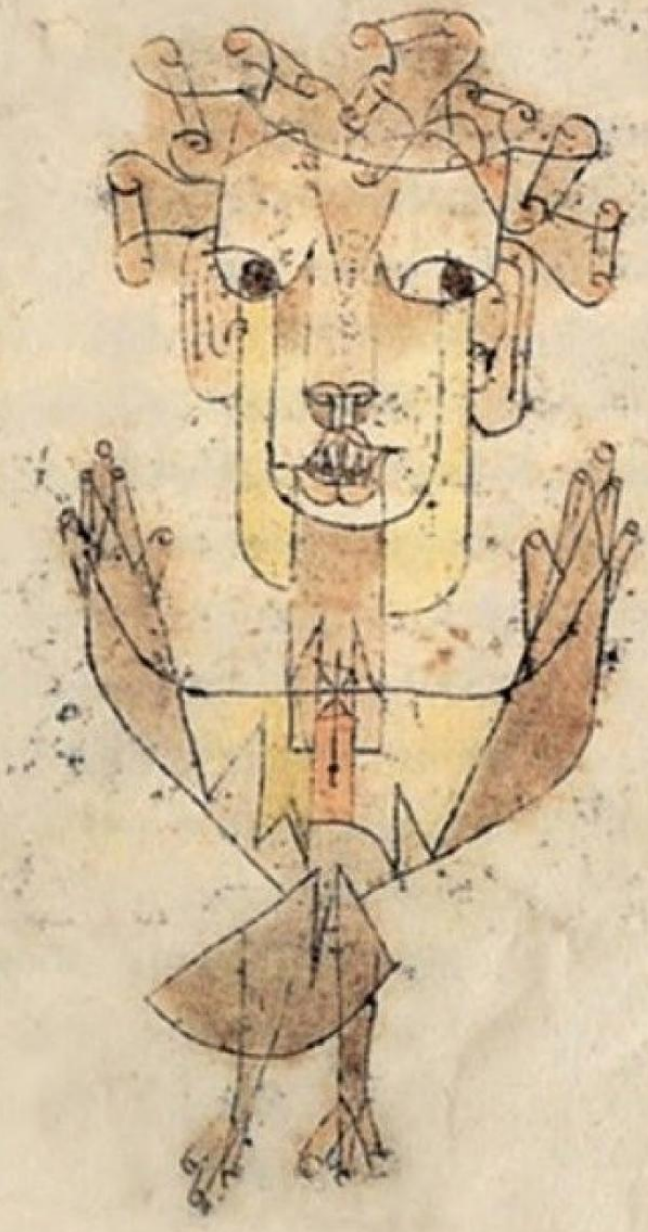

DIDIER FASSIN

LIFE

A CRITICAL USER'S MANUAL

Table of Contents

Life

A Critical User's Manual

Didier Fassin

polity

Copyright page

First published in German as *Das Leben*: *Eine kritische Gebrauchsanweisung*, © Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2017

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

101 Station Landing

Suite 300

Medford, MA 02155, USA

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2664-2

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-2665-9 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fassin, Didier, author.

Title: Life : a critical user's manual / Didier Fassin.

Other titles: Leben. English

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity, 2018. | Translation of: Das Leben : eine kritische Gebrauchsanweisung. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017048527 (print) | LCCN 2018005185 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509526680 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509526642 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509526659 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Life. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Anthropology / Cultural.

Classification: LCC BD431 (ebook) | LCC BD431 .F2813 2018 (print) | DDC 113/.8–dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017048527

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon Roman by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Dedication

For Anne-Claire
in whose company
I have found it possible to envision
a user's manual for life

In isolation, a puzzle piece means nothing – just an impossible question, an opaque challenge. But as soon as you have succeeded in fitting it into one of its neighbors, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece.... The two pieces so miraculously conjoined are henceforth one, which in its turn will be a source of error, hesitation, dismay, and expectation.

Georges Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, 1987 [1978]

Acknowledgments

The honor conferred on me by the invitation to deliver the Adorno Lectures at the Institut für Sozialforschung at Goethe University, Frankfurt, is the only excuse I can offer to justify the ambitious project suggested by the title of this book. To tell the truth, it was not without some embarrassment that, in the months leading up to these lectures, my response to those who asked what my subject would be was that I would ponder about *life*. The apparent simplicity of a three-, four- or five-letter word (depending on whether it is uttered in French, English, or German) was undoubtedly deceptive, and my interlocutors' incredulous hesitance following this audacious yet enigmatic declaration forced me to give them something in the way of explanation. So I told them of my desire to think back through a series of primarily ethnographic studies I had undertaken over the last two decades on three continents, and to test a series of philosophical concepts that had both inspired me and left me unsatisfied through those years. I spoke of what had been a permanent quest, in all my various fieldworks, about ways of living and of treating human lives. I spoke of forms of life, of ethics of life, of politics of life. In short, in order to make sense of my empirical and theoretical questioning, I was attempting to provide them with a *user's manual*.

In part a form of homage to Georges Perec, who declared that “to live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself,” my use of this expression in the title of this book is also a way of bringing my project down to a more modest scale, making it more easily graspable, giving it the appearance of a bricolage, inviting readers to see it as a puzzle to be pieced together as they read. For all that, the subject of this text is indeed as the title states: it deals with life – and with lives. It would be easy, and certainly on one level true, to state that this is the guiding principle of a career that began in medicine and then diverted to anthropology: in turning from the teachings of biology to the gathering of biographies, I have moved from the life of organs to the life of human beings. But there is more to it than the fortunes of a professional trajectory. For my way of scrutinizing life through forms of life, ethics of life, and politics of life is not neutral. It is marked by the theme of inequality – the inequality of lives which, from my childhood in a public housing project to my discovery of non-Western societies through the extreme poverty I encountered in Indian cities, has formed my worldview. In fact this book could, perhaps more explicitly, have been titled “On the inequality of lives.” If all of Perec's work is haunted by an absence – that of his parents, who died in World War II – I would say that my research is inhabited throughout by an awareness: that of unequal lives. Hence the addition of the adjective *critical* qualifying my user's manual for life.

In reworking these lectures for publication, I have felt it important to retain not only their progression – a triptych in which each part opens with a theoretical exposition that serves as an introduction to the empirical investigation, with the aim of proposing a new synthesis – but also the

context – the reference to Adorno at the beginning of the book, and the reminder, in the epilogue to each chapter, of the tragic events that accompanied the elaboration of *Minima Moralia*. All writing has a history. I wanted to preserve the spirit of these lectures, given in Frankfurt at the institution where one of the most important forms of social critique was born nearly a century ago, and has continued to be practiced and developed since that time.

This of course gives me the opportunity to express my gratitude to Axel Honneth, then the director of the Institut für Sozialforschung, for inviting me, to my surprise, to deliver these lectures and for thus giving me the opportunity to bring together the hitherto scattered pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of life. I would also like to thank all the scholars, whether permanent members of the Institut or occasional visitors, whose comments, questions, and criticisms have helped me to refine my thinking, particularly José Brunner, Thomas Khurana, Thomas Lemke, Yves Sintomer, Sarah Speck, Felix Trautmann, and Peter Wagner, who were joined later, in Paris, by Sandra Laugier, Guillaume Le Blanc, and Marielle Macé. I am also grateful to John Thompson for heartily supporting this book project, to Rachel Gomme for her elegant translation of the preamble and conclusion, and to Célia Chalfoun for her thorough revision of my initial version of the three chapters. Finally, since this book is nourished by several decades of academic research and human experience, I owe an incalculable debt to the many persons, particularly students and colleagues at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, but above all to those I have met in the course of my research, notably in South Africa and in France, who shared fragments of their life with me.

Princeton, February 2017

Note on the Illustration of the Cover

Angelus Novus was painted by Paul Klee in 1920 using an oil transfer technique he had invented. It was purchased the following year by Walter Benjamin, who had it hung in the successive places where he lived and found in it an inspiration for several of his works, writing that having seen it could make the viewer "understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction." In the ninth thesis of his posthumous essay "on the philosophy of history," he describes it as the angel who, caught in a storm blowing from Paradise, contemplates the catastrophe of past events while being irresistibly propelled into the future. When he fled Germany in 1933, he brought it with him, but had to leave it in Paris with Georges Bataille, as he continued southwards to reach Spain. Just as he had crossed the border, in 1940, he was arrested and kept in custody in a hotel, where he was found dead the next day. At the end of the war, the artwork was passed with other possessions on to Theodor Adorno, who was at the time writing his *Minima Moralia*, before ending with Gershom Scholem, whose widow eventually gave it in 1987 to the Israel Museum, in Jerusalem. This "angel of history," as Benjamin called it, has therefore an intimate and lengthy relationship with the Frankfurt School, in its most tragic period. Coincidentally, the epigraph of the preamble of Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* is a quotation by Paul Klee, which reads: "The eye follows the paths that have been laid down for it in the work." Let us, then, follow these paths.

Preamble
Minima Theoria

> If life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it ... Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.
>
> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 1974 [1951]

In the opening paragraph of his dedication to his friend and colleague Max Horkheimer, of *Minima Moralia*, the bulk of which was written in exile in the United States during World War II, Theodor Adorno refers, with bitterness and nostalgia, to "what the philosophers once knew as life."[1] In modern societies, he continues, material production has effectively reduced this life "to the rank of appendage," the sphere of consumption offering no more than an "appearance of life," or rather, a "caricature of true life." In these conditions, what he calls the "melancholy science" of the thinkers of his time – an ironic reference to Nietzsche's "gay science" – "relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy," but is now "lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivion: the teaching of the good life." It is worth pausing on the fact that the German expression *das richtige Leben* is translated in French as *juste vie*: in fact, the term has the dual sense of "good life" and "right life," illustrating a semantic tension present at the heart of moral philosophy, between the ethical relationship to the self and the ethical relationship to others.

However we interpret the term, this pessimistic observation by Adorno, the most significant figure in the first generation of the Frankfurt School and hence one of the founders of "critical social theory," sounds the death knell of the full moral life – whether it is said to be true, right, or good. All that remains is an "alienated form," whose impasses Adorno strives to demonstrate through a series of short, somber meditations on the most mundane facts and the most ordinary objects of the contemporary world. These meditations thus offer what Rahel Jaeggi calls "a critique of capitalism as a form of life," in other words, not only as unequal relations of production, but also as a degraded mode of existence: according to her, they put forward both "an ethics and a critique of ethics" – the possibility of a different life and the impossibility of bringing it into existence.[2] Indeed, Adorno's deliberately fragmentary reflections on the cultural practices of his era pose the question of what social and political preconditions would make it possible to institute "an order more worthy of human beings." Meanwhile, he acknowledges, we are far from that place, given that "our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer." This is the manifestation of a "hopelessness" that is rendered all the more acute for being written in the shadows of the ruins of Nazi Germany.

Since Adorno's text was published, more than six decades have passed, and

capitalism, which is now barely even mentioned by name – having been superseded by the ambiguous euphemism "neoliberalism" – seems still more triumphant and less contested than it was when Adorno wrote his essay. At the same time the tragic lessons of World War II and its genocides, which cast a painful shadow over the thinking of Adorno's contemporaries, seem to be fading as a politics of identity comes to the fore and authoritarian tendencies are exposed – the violence and uncertainty of a troubled world serving to legitimize all kinds of exclusion and repression. Worrying signs of a new "age of anxiety" – to borrow the title of W. H. Auden's long poem written during the same postwar period – these vicissitudes of democratic life affect human lives in profoundly differentiated and often unequal ways.[3] In other words, *Minima Moralia* has lost none of its pertinence, even if its analyses need to be adjusted to contemporary reality in order to ponder anew the "damaged life" of the book's subtitle. Here the paradox of Adorno's reflection needs to be emphasized. Faced with the enormity of the catastrophe of World War II and the Nazi regime's project of extermination, he makes what Miguel Abensour calls "the choice of the small," which "is inherently bound up with a revolt against the world of war and terror."[4] Hence the minimalist title; hence the shift of focus to the singularity of the individual; hence the affirmation of the relevance of philosophy as defense of life – whether true, right, or good.

In this book, I propose a different orientation, resituating individuals both in society and in the world: in society, that is, in the relational space that constitutes them; in the world, that is, in the global space within which they move. Rather than the disruptions of the ethical subject to which Adorno devotes his reflections, I attempt to grasp the tribulations of the political community. In place of the cultural developments he calls into question, I focus on deciphering structural facts. To this end, in place of Adorno's critique of ways of life, I propose a critique of the treatment of life and of lives, and more specifically of those vulnerable and precarious lives to which many human beings are reduced. My question is not: how are we living? Or, how should we live? But rather: what value do we attach to human life as an abstract concept? And how do we evaluate human lives as concrete realities? Any discrepancy or any contradiction between the evaluation of life in general and the devaluing of certain lives in particular then becomes indicative of a moral economy of life in contemporary societies.

By moral economy, I mean the production, circulation, appropriation, and contestation of values as well as affects, around an object, a problem, or more broadly a social fact – in this case, life. This concept borrows both from E. P. Thompson's analysis, in which he explains the eighteenth-century English food riots in terms of the moral economy of agricultural laborers (that is, in terms of the norms and social obligations that govern their expectations and their practices), and from Lorraine Daston's reading in her study of the production of knowledge in the seventeenth century, where she emphasizes the role of the moral economy of science (in other words, the values and affects shared by scientists).[5] I depart from these analyses, however, on several key points. Unlike Thompson, I do not restrict the moral economy purely to the domain of goods and services, but extend it to any


image
not
available

Index