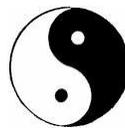


*Confessions of a Biographer:
Reflections upon the Theory of Biography by an Historian Novice in the Field*

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LEA Working Paper Series
No. 5, March 2019



LEA WORKING PAPER SERIES
Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (LEA)
History Department
University of São Paulo
Brazil

***Confessions of a Biographer:
Reflections upon the Theory of Biography by an Historian Novice in the Field***

Angelo Segrillo¹

CONFESSION NO. 1 (*about theory*)

I started writing my first biography without having (deeply) studied the theoretical underpinnings of the genre. As a Brazilian historian with several books published, I assumed that my previous professional training in the general field would suffice for the new task.

REFLECTION NO. 1 (*about theory*)

In the process, as I started reviewing theoretical works about biography, I was struck by the number of them stressing that the genre seems to be “resistant to theorization” (Fetz & Schweiger, 2009, p. 5), “undertheorized” (Lee, 2009, p. 94) or “not having solid theorizing” (Renders and de Haan, 2014, p. 4). Monk (2007, p. 528) is the most radical in this direction: “biography is fundamentally and essentially, to its very fingertips, as it were, a *nontheoretical* exercise” (and it is all to the good this way, according to him).

Why should it be so? What makes it so difficult to provide biography with proper theory? A number of factors seems to be involved in this phenomenon, but a central one, in my view, is the indeterminate status of biography among several fields. The main dichotomy is whether biography is history or literature. Since there are different types of biographies, specific cases can occupy different spaces in a wide spectrum that ranges from one pole (history, non-fiction) to the other (literature, fiction).

The problem is not only the oscillation of biography between the poles of literature and history (non-fiction and fiction). There are several other fields of knowledge that claim to provide underpinnings for the genre, be it sociology (*as per* the Diltheyan model described in Erben, 1993 or the Weberian impulse suggested by Nadel, 1984, p. 188), psychology (especially, but not only, in the so-called psychobiographies), philosophy (see, for example, Monk, 2007), and even ethnology (as in the idiosyncratic suggestion by Clifford, 1978), to name just a few of the major spheres of knowledge which contend for the biography “prize.”

This indeterminacy makes it difficult to create (a) proper theory for biography. Depending on where a specific biography locates itself in this broad spectrum, theories coming from history or literature (or from the other fields mentioned) may not be able to encompass it. If biography clearly belonged to one specific field of knowledge, it would probably be easier to have this established theoretical field enveloping it naturally.

Of course, one alternative out of this problem would be to make biography an autonomous field, not related intrinsically to history, literature or any other field, along the lines suggested, for example, by Pimlott (1999, p. 33), according to whom biography

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should “shake off its own inferiority complex, and establish independent credentials in relation to art, literature and objectivity.” However, this is a minority viewpoint and has not been implemented in practice (in this case, *in theory*).

The degree of difficulty involved in extricating biography from its root sources becomes clear when we see how biography evolved historically. When biography arose in Greco-Roman times, it did not belong to either literature or history: it was related to ethics. (Fornara, 1988, p. 3) For example, Plutarch made clear that his biographies were not history and that he wrote them with the purpose of providing examples on what to do and what not to do in order to inspire greatness and moral character. The introduction he wrote for the comparison of Alexander, the Great, with Caesar in *Parallel Lives* reads: “It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations [...]” (Plutarch, 1996)²

Even though biography was viewed as closer to ethics in the beginning, it soon gravitated towards the two poles of literature and history. This can be seen as a “natural” movement. On the one hand, biography was a form of narrative, a “story” and, therefore, the literary qualities inherent in it came to the fore. If biographies are supposed to motivate people ethically, they will fulfill this function better if they are written in a way that is artistically beautiful and enticing to the audience. Thus, being a good biographer meant being a good writer. On the other hand, biography was not a literary genre in the sense poetry was. Since biography had a commitment to the faithful description of the life of an individual, here imagination could not have free rein; its outermost limit was truth, the boundary of which it could (should) not overstep. Gradually there was a coming together of biography and history, with biography seen as an historical writing, a form of history. After all, the “great deeds of men” were, from the beginning, part and parcel of history. (Fornara, 1988, p. 185) One can see the gradual overlap of this expression with biography, more and more encompassing narratives of deeds (actions) of “great men.” (Carlyle, 1841)

This oscillation of biography between literature and history, between fiction and non-fiction, has accompanied the development of the genre for a long time. In modern times the movement toward history (the commitment to truth) became stronger. Abandoning the style of hagiography typical of the Middle Ages, Samuel Johnson in his seminal essays on the biographical method — *The dignity and usefulness of biography*, in *The Rambler*, no. 60, October 13, 1750, and *Biography, how best performed*, in *The Idler*, no. 84, November 24, 1759 — stressed the need for the biographer to be faithful to truth, even if it is unpleasant. As he wrote in his concluding words in *The Rambler* essay no. 60: “If the biographer writes from personal knowledge, and makes haste to gratify the public curiosity, there is danger lest his interest, his fear, his gratitude, or his tenderness, overpower his fidelity, and tempt him to conceal, if not to invent [...] If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.” (Johnson, 2017)

² The mainstream view is that biography originally was not considered part of history. Fornara (1988, p. 185), for example, said that in those times “history, the record of man’s memorable deeds, was irrelevant to biography, except when deeds illuminate character.” For an alternative, more nuanced view, which regards biography closer to history even in Plutarch’s work, see Hershbell (1997).

The Johnsonian paradigm became a model to be followed by biographers and was a watershed in the development of the genre. Arguably, one might say that it became the main paradigm since then — even today most conventional biographies proud themselves on being truthful. However, this *avant la lettre quasi* positivist approach to biography soon came under attack from different quarters. The nineteenth-century Victorian biographies would later be accused of sycophancy, of being mere meek, servile, flattering portraits of important people. At least this was the scathing criticism expounded by Lytton Strachey (1918, p. V-VII) in the foreword to his *Eminent Victorians*. Virginia Woolf elaborated on Strachey's foundations in order to spell out some principles of what came to be called the *New Biography*. Woolf, while retaining the commitment of the biographer to truth, opened the door to the importance of imagination in the biographical craft. In other words, with her the biographical pendulum swings again subtly to the literature pole. As she put in her 1939 essay *The Art of Biography*:

[The biographer] is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art but something betwixt and between [...] By telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of the high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects the facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders [...] (Woolf, 1939, pp. 509-510)

The next big movement of the biographical pendulum towards the literature (“fiction”) pole — as opposed to the “history/non-fiction” pole — came with post-structuralism and post-modernism in the late twentieth century. The concept of “truth,” even in history itself, came under attack from these positions. (White, 1980) Pierre Bourdieu, in his 1986 essay “The Biographical Illusion,” pointed out that describing life as an orderly, cradle-to-grave logical sequence is to fall prey to the illusion that life is a coherent whole when it is not.

To speak of “life history” implies the not insignificant presupposition that life is a history [...] consisting of a beginning [...], various stages and an end [...] To produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that is, as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events, is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion [...] Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself) and without ties other than the association to a “subject” whose constancy is probably that of a proper name, is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure [...] (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 69-72)

In some radical post-modern variants, “history” has been reduced to “stories” or “histories” (*i.e.*, the different narratives by individual historians without any metanarrative above them). Accordingly, biography lost its conventional character as description of lives of men (usually great men) and new, unconventional, experimental forms appeared. Gender studies stimulated biographies that were not of “men” (males); microhistory brought with itself biographies not of “great” people but also of “ordinary” people. And biographies are not necessarily of “people” anymore: biographies of animals (*e.g.*, Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, about a dog) and even objects (Tretiakov, 1929) have surfaced. And biographies are not necessarily about a whole life but rather can concentrate on a specific period of someone’s life or even be a collection of “biographemes” (memory fragments) written in no specific chronological or logical order. (Barthes, 1971, p. 14)

Being methodologically torn between many different fields and sprawling functionally across diverse spheres, no wonder there is difficulty in tying biography to a specific field of knowledge or sphere of action. This can give freedom of action to biographers in practice, but hinders the establishment of theoretical underpinnings that can be accepted in a more or less consensual manner.

However, I believe there is another, less noticed reason, for the fact that it is difficult to theorize biography in a comprehensive manner. Biography is directly, intrinsically, viscerally, related to *life*. And life as a whole is not a rational, systematic, purely logical form of existence. Although life encompasses rationality, its non-rational components — emotions, instinct, etc. — simply make it impossible to describe, study or otherwise encompass life in a purely rational fashion. That is one of the main reasons why it is difficult to create a theory on biography, just as it is difficult to create a (comprehensive) theory about life itself. It is a different situation with history. History certainly encompasses life (and, therefore, by the way, biography too, in my opinion). After all, a purely structural history — which would not take into consideration aspects of the lives of people — would not only be dull reading but also unrealistic (again, in my opinion). But history encompasses not only lives (individuals, people, etc.), with their non-rational aspects but also many other aspects (social institutions, the economy, etc.) which are more impersonal and can be analyzed from a purely rational angle. Therefore, history has many aspects which can be grasped in rational ways. This facilitates the creation of (rational) theories about history. Since history also has non-rational segments (related to lives, emotional aspects of people, etc.), even history has difficulty in being captured by *one* big, general theory. We do not have *one* (consensual) theory of history but several (competing ones). That is the best we can get because the non-rational aspects in history — many related to *life* — prevent us from being able to grasp the whole panorama in one swoop.

Now, the question arises. If we can have various theories of history to explain rationally those parts of history that can be rationally explained, why can’t we have the same with biography, that is, not *one* (general) theory of biography but rather several competing theories? The fact that *life* encompasses many non-rational sides — unlike history which, reversely, encompasses many rational sides — makes it difficult not only to have one general theory of biography, but even several theories of biography. The situation is compounded by the fact already mentioned above that biography lies among many different spheres of knowledge and therefore has an intrinsic identity crisis.

This double quandary makes theorizing difficult and leads us to the present situation when we actually do not have (fully-fledged) (even partial) *theories* of biography, but only useful theoretical *insights* into biography and the biographical method — brought about by authors like the ones cited along this article. I believe we have not yet made the leap from *insights* to *theories* on biography because we cling on the hope (a new “biographical illusion”?) that we can encompass biography as a whole, as a relatively homogeneous genre. As we saw in this article, not only biography has historically oscillated amongst various poles but it has grown into such multi-faceted medium (biography of individuals, group biography, biography of animals, biography of objects, etc.) that we should give up the illusion that we can strive for a theory that can encompass biography as a whole (actually, as a homogeneous whole). We should accept biography’s heterogeneity; that different types of biographies require different methods; that biography can be multidisciplinary and therefore we need different theories of biography that can coexist and illuminate certain types of biographies, but not necessarily others. With this more modest goal in sight — and full conscience of the non-rational sides in biography (life) that are “theory-resistant” — we may be able to make the leap from *insights* to *theory* (*theories*, that is) in the biographical field.

CONFESSION NO. 2 (*about practice*)

There are many perils along the path of the biographer. For example, according to those who emphasize the essentially literary character of biography (the “literature pole”), it must have literary qualities, must be written in a beautiful (artistic) way. According to those (*e.g.*, Freud, 1910) who emphasize the inherent psychological nature of description of *lives*, one needs to adequately describe the psychological make-up and motivations of the main character. According to Ian Kershaw (2008; and other history-minded professional historian-biographers), a biography needs not only to describe the individual characteristics of its subject but also illuminate wider aspects of society at large. According to Monk (2007), a biography may (and should) also have philosophical implications. According to Bourdieu (1986), a biographer should not fall prey to the “biographical illusion” that a life can be described as a logical, purposive sequence of events of the “cradle-to-grave” type. Barthes (1971) proposed the writing of *biographemes* instead.

There are many perils along the path of the biographer indeed!

However, I must confess that the most dangerous peril and the worst methodological “temptation” to resist for me in my practical experience as a biographer was a very classical one; actually one could call it the “original” pitfall (sin) that biographers have been warned against by ancient (*e.g.*, Plutarch) and modern (*e.g.*, Samuel Johnson) pioneers of biography: the need not to be “hypnotized” by (attracted to) one’s subject to the point of losing the critical faculty about him/her.

REFLECTION NO. 2 (*about practice*)

In my case, the danger was especially strong because the subject of my biography was a highly controversial individual who divides opinions, sparks both admiration and

revulsion (but rarely indifference): Karl Marx.³ And not only that. My own life background put me in a strange position in relation to Marx. I graduated from an American university and went on to pursue my master's degree in the Soviet Union. My students joke with me that I am a product of the Cold War with this bipolar educational background. It also left me feeling like a fish out of water — wherever I was — in relation to Karl Marx. In the United States, where Marx was often demonized, I used to defend him; and in the USSR, where he was often subject of a type of “hagiography,” I found myself pointing out failings and contradictions in him.

Although I am not a Marxist militant, I am an admirer of Marx's intellectual prowess. Therefore, I thought I was in a fairly “objective” position to write a biography of Marx. My moderate admiration made possible fairly extensive reading about of his works — knowledge necessary to be able to understand and convey the gist of his rather complicated theories. The fact that I was not a Marxist “militant” (plus my first-hand experience with the problems of actually existing socialism) ensured that I would not be uncritical about him.

But reality is more complicated than theory. In real life (in the real biography), things were not so simple. To start with, my own premises as an historian came into play. I began my studies of history trying to shun the traditional history “of great men” (rulers, kings, wars, etc. as determinant factors) that we were taught at school. I was more attracted to investigating the wider social conditions under which all individuals (not only the “great” ones) lived. Although I enjoyed reading biographies of influential figures — Catherine the Great, Hitler, Churchill, etc. — I was suspicious of the tendency of some of these books to reduce the history of the times to actions by the “biographee of the moment.” Before I started my first biography, from the many authors/theoreticians of biography we mentioned in this article, my position was probably closer to that of Ian Kershaw (2008, p. 38) who wants to use biography “as a prism on wider issues of historical understanding and not in a narrow focus on private life and personality.” In other words, what delighted me most in the biographies of Catherine the Great, were not so much the spicy details of her secret love life (or the way she had her husband killed), but how aspects of her life (her education, the way she, as a foreigner, related to Russia) contributed to generate specific conditions that influenced Russian history.

Expecting to write my biography on the level of a respected newspaper, rather than a gossipy tabloid, I soon became entangled with the special features of Marx's life. I could have written an intellectual biography of Marx, emphasizing his ideas and his works. Great biographies were written in this way, like Berlin's (1939) and Cornu's (1955-1970). But even I was not satisfied with remaining in the comfortable (for a “high-brow” like me) safe realm of ideas. If I was going to write a biography, I would go all the way. I would dirty my hands in the bath water of daily life minute details no matter how unimportant — from the standpoint of society — they might seem to be.

In the beginning, I felt safe doing so. In the realm of ideas, I would occasionally defend or attack certain intellectual positions when disputes arose between different interpretations. However, in the realm of everyday life, I was bent on being very non-committal, dispassionately describing facts (habits, actions) with the cold detachment of a doctor examining his patient or a zoologist describing the habits of animals; no intention to be judgmental but only describe them without much commentary. My comments

³ Segrillo, Angelo. *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*. Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018.

would be reserved for the more important intellectual moments of Marx's life which ended up having wider social consequences.

Alas, things did not exactly happen this way *in real life* (in the real biography)! And the problem was not that previous biographers of Marx passed judgment on his personal actions and life (was he a sponge for borrowing money from Engels his whole adult life? Was he a careless father for not providing proper conditions to his family having as a result half of his children dying in infancy? Did he actually cheat on his wife by impregnating their maid?). No, even these completely personal details I would describe in a very dispassionate, non-judgmental way, stating simply the — excuse me for the word — *facts* as they appeared to me from the extant primary sources and documents.

The problem came because in Marx's case, the Kershawian stance on biographies took a strange turn. Some biographers questioned whether Marx's personal way of dealing with people in his political relationships, which some deemed heavy-handed and even disloyal (Machiavellian), was reproduced by his followers (like Lenin and Stalin) and led to a kind of politics whose result was the authoritarian (totalitarian) socialism of the USSR type.

Wow! Personal life (and ways) having social consequences! If I was to follow Kershaw's advice, I could not simply avoid the issue whether this kind of personal behavior really had these social consequences.

This is not the place to reproduce the debates on this question in my biography. Suffice it to say that this brought me down from the clouds of my highbrow initial stance and made me grapple with the evaluation of many daily life actions (and their consequences) "under the pretext" of their social implications. I subtly started to regard personal, day to day behavior under another light and gained appreciation for the existential value inherent in simple actions and habits of daily life which had not been apparent to me before. For example, I reproduced in my biography the well-known fact that Jenny, Marx's wife, used to make clean copies of Marx's terrible handwriting before sending his texts to the editors. However, on closer examination, I noticed how these copying sessions became not only a passive copying exercise but also moments when Jenny could discuss with Marx many of the ideas in his texts, including giving him suggestions on how to improve them. This "active" stance did not become clear from traditional biographical descriptions of Marx. Not many readers realized that Jenny was an intellectually active woman, writing theater reviews, discussing politics with Marx's partners and even writing political texts of her own. Much of this other side of Jenny became apparent to me only when I explored these mundane copying sessions in more detail. Another example is when I dug deeper into the daily routine of Marx's household and of its governess/maid Helene Demuth (nicknamed *Lenchen*). Often seen as a secondary character in the Marx drama, the examination of her quotidian routine reveals some interesting aspects. The fact that this semi-literate woman of peasant extraction could beat one of the most powerful brains of the world then (*i.e.* Marx himself) in chess says something about her own intellectual potential (and perhaps helps to explain the great influence she had on Marx's daughters' upbringing and on the Marx household in general).

Little by little, I came to appreciate the heuristic value of the small actions of everyday life *in and of themselves*. I felt that this was my baptism as a real biographer instead of being an historian writing a biography.

About my final conclusion whether Marx's personal actions and way of handling himself in political battles were passed on to his followers and ended up creating the type of authoritarian socialism we had in the twentieth-century ... Well, I am not giving you a spoiler of my own biography here, dear reader. If you want to know this specific detail, read *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*.

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