

THE CHALLENGES OF BIOGRAPHY: EUROPEAN-AMERICAN REFLECTIONS

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I. The Complexity of Biography

Biography as a perspective on the world, a method of historical research, a form of literature and a phenomenon of popular culture is currently enjoying another boom on both sides of the Atlantic. Biography continues to be one of the most popular genres of non-fiction writing, offering a broad spectrum of variants that range from literary to scholarly biography, not to mention numerous non-prose forms like biopics, comics, and even operas. While the general reading public has never lost its taste for life stories, biography now is also back within academia's ambit. After a longer period of marginalization and theoretical neglect under the onslaught of social history, the cultural turn in the humanities has triggered a revival of biography among scholars. This new fashion has not only produced an intense and diverse theoretical debate in a hitherto largely undertheorized field but also a lot of experimentation with new forms of biographical research and narrative.¹

Still, despite all these exciting new developments in the field of an emerging "new biography," biographical approaches continue to trigger considerable fundamental criticism. Pierre Bourdieu thus spoke of the "biographical illusion," insisting that the suggested coherence and directedness of a biography is a "socially irreproachable artifact." As such it was largely the result of an individual applying the socially accepted practices, models and narratives of social identity to his own life.² Other critics, describing biography as a "quixotic enterprise," highlight the elusiveness of a historical actor's personality and character.³ Others have stressed the impossibility of reconstructing the life of a person as it actually was from the records, usually written, handed down to us, as extensive as this biographical evidence may be.⁴ Finally, many historians reject biography because it doesn't seem to add substantially to our understanding of the past. Thus, in September 1999, Stanley Fish attacked modern biography as "Minutiae without Meaning" that produced "little more than a collection of random incidents, and the only truth being told is the truth of contingency, of events succeeding one another in a universe of accident and chance."⁵

- 1 The most recent works on biography capturing these theoretical debates include: Christian Klein, ed., *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien* (Stuttgart, 2009); Thomas Etzemüller, *Biographien: Lesen — Erforschen — Erzählen* (Frankfurt, 2012); Peter France and William St. Clair, eds., *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography* (Oxford, 2002); Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000); and Lloyd E. Ambrosius, ed., *Writing Biography: Historians and Their Craft* (Lincoln, Neb., 2004).
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (Los Angeles, 2000), 297-303, here 301.
- 3 Peter France and William St. Clair, "Introduction," in *Mapping Lives*, ed. France and St. Clair, 2.
- 4 William St. Clair, "The Biographer as Archeologist," in *Mapping Lives*, ed. France and St. Clair, 219-234; Leonard Cassuto, "The Silhouette and the Secret Self: Theorizing Biography in Our Times," *American Quarterly* 58 (Dec. 2006): 1249-1261, here 1253-1254.
- 5 Stanley Fish, "Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning," *New York Times*, Sep. 7, 1999, p. A19.

This criticism has to be confronted, of course, and the answers cannot be simple because biography itself is anything but simple. Rather, it is a highly complex phenomenon, and whatever we do with it, we have to start with the complexity that results from biography being situated between scholarship, literature and popular culture. The term “biography” itself has multiple meanings; it oscillates between the life itself and its narrative representation.⁶ To make matters even more complicated, “biography” also refers to an epistemological principle of organizing a perspective on the past centered on persons and individual agency. As such, biography rests on the premise that historical individuals are clearly identifiable psycho-physical entities which can be analyzed as historical facts in terms of change over time and of cause and effect.

Alongside the very ambivalence of the term, the hybridity of the literary genre “biography” defines the complexity of the phenomenon that we are talking about here. Biography moves between fact and fiction, *curricula vitae* and literary narratives, the fact-based historical reconstruction and the imaginative construction of lived lives. A biography turns a *curriculum vita* into a story, it reconstructs past worlds through narration, and it produces narrated worlds of the past. Following narrative patterns in the service of a “good story,” it has its own literary conventions and its own pressures of dramaturgy, climax, cohesion and closure. As a narrative, a biography turns the life of a historical person into a meaningful and fully intelligible whole that is constructed by the biographer through his or her selection and composition of individual motifs and elements.⁷ It is the biographer who decides on beginnings and endings, about periodization and turning-points, about linear or non-linear patterns of narrative, about what he tells and what he chooses not to tell. In transforming lives into stories, biographies are carried by the tension between lived and narrated lives. Situated somewhere between scholarship and literary art, biography shares many features with the novel.

This, however, is still not the whole story. Biography is also a hybrid because of its complex relationship to autobiography.⁸ The historicist tradition drew a clear distinction between both forms of life writing, with autobiography defined as the self-description of a person while biography was the source-based reconstruction of a subject’s life by a third person. Thus, the supposed “subjectivity” of autobiography was sharply distinguished from the supposed “objectivity” of biography. This once clear-cut distinction has increasingly eroded over the last

6 Christian Klein, “Editorial,” *Non Fiktion: Arsenal der anderen Gattungen* 8 (2013): 7–11; Etzemüller, *Biographien*, 7–24.

7 Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London, 1984); Klein, *Handbuch Biographie*, 199–219.

8 On autobiography, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, 2010); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, N.J., 1985); Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008); Volker Depkat, “Autobiographie und die soziale Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 29 (2003): 441–476; Volker Depkat, “Zum Stand und zu den Perspektiven der Autobiographieforschung in der Geschichtswissenschaft,” *BIOS: Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* 23 (2010): 170–187.

two decades or so. Today's scholars point instead to the multiple and complex entanglements between autobiography and biography. It is very hard for the biographer to step out of the shadow of his subject's autobiographical self-descriptions so that the voice and self-concept of a biographical subject are acknowledged and analyzed by the biographer's narrative.

Then there are the biographers themselves, who are hardly ever detached observers but have a personal, if not emotional relationship to their subjects. Anybody who writes a biography has his own lived life as a criterion of comparison and judgment. Thus, one always has to assess the autobiographical element when an author commits an "act of biography."

A last factor of complexity needs to be addressed: the readers and the communicative pragmatics of biography.⁹ It is true that biography is one of the last bastions of referential writing. They want to be read as referential texts, and the reader reads them with the expectation of learning something about the life of a real historical person. At the same time, the author of a biography promises to do just that. Taking Philippe Lejeune's idea of an "autobiographical pact" to the field of biography, we could say that the writers and readers of biography enter into a "biographical pact" that validates the biography as a referential text.¹⁰ In sum, the complexity of biography as a hybrid literary genre results from the multilayered and complex relationships between the biographical subject, the biographer, the narration and the reader.

The very complexity of the phenomenon biography calls for interdisciplinarity, and biographical research is very interdisciplinary, indeed. A recent handbook on the methods, traditions and theories of biography edited by Christian Klein thus contains chapters on biographical studies in history, literary criticism, art history, musicology, sociology, political science, theology and religious studies, pedagogy, medicine and psychology, gender studies, postcolonial studies and Jewish Studies. Against this backdrop of a mindboggling diversity of the field, the focus of the following remarks will be on the development, major problems and opportunities of biographical research in the field of history.

II. The Ups and Downs of Biography in Historiography

Generally speaking, the development of biography in academic historiography was closely tied to the major paradigm shifts in the

⁹ Volker Depkat, "Plädoyer für eine kommunikationsspragmatische Erneuerung der Quellenkunde," in *Geschichte, Öffentlichkeit, Kommunikation: Festschrift für Bernd Söseemann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Patrick Merziger, et. al. (Stuttgart, 2010), 205–221; Volker Depkat, "Verräter und Patriot: Die Biographik zu Benedict Arnold in den Selbstverständigungsdebatten der USA seit 1945," *Non Fiktion: Arsenal der anderen Gattungen* 8 (2013): 69–88.

¹⁰ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*. (Paris, 1975); Etzemüller, *Biographien*, 128–129.

profession. In the beginning, of course, there was historicism, and historicism was three things in one, a *weltanschauung*, a concept of history, and a method for investigating the past.¹¹ As a *weltanschauung* looking upon all things historically, historicism offered a very powerful concept of history centering in ideas, individuals and states. The relationship between these three prime historical forces was inherently dynamic: ideas were thought to be historical actors in their own right striving for “realization.” Historical individuals were both carriers of certain ideas and actors in the historical process, literally “making” history by transforming ideas into reality. For a historiography indebted to this person- and agency-centered concept of history, biography was somehow the ideal method of research and form of narrative.¹²

As a method, historicism centered in the epistemological concept of “*verstehen*,” which is only imperfectly translated as “understanding.” Rather, it means “participant observation,” “immersion,” and “empathy” with the subject of study. Focused on the “individuality,” “uniqueness,” and “contingency” of historical phenomena, historicism was driven by a quest for the specific and contingent. In this context, the term “*verstehen*” described the intellectual operation which, in cyclical movements, embedded concrete phenomena into the larger whole of the time specific contexts to reconstruct the specific “meaning” and “function” of a historical phenomenon.¹³ The social history turn of the 1960s–1970s replaced the focus on the individual and agency with anonymous structures and processes, and it moved away from “*verstehen*” to embrace “*erklären*,” i.e., the explanation and analysis of historical phenomena in terms of general patterns, external factors and structural formations. Social historians analyzed societies as a whole and their major groups were interested in patterns of inequality, the mechanisms of social cohesion and the sources of social conflict. This form of historical inquiry privileged the collective over the individual and was only interested in individual biographies and experiences as manifestations of collective entities. Stressing that all individuality was socially conditioned, social historians tended to be more interested in social types, collective profiles and recurring patterns in individual lives. Therefore, social groups and shared social identities classified along the lines of class, occupation, gender, ethnicity, race and religion became the new objects of study. In the eyes of many social historians, for example the late Gerald D. Feldman, social historians and biographers were living on different planets.¹⁴

11 Volker Depkat, “The ‘Cultural Turn’ in German and American Historiography,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 54 (2009): 425–450, esp. 430–433.

12 Andreas Gestrich, “Einleitung: Sozialhistorische Biographieforschung,” in *Biographie – sozialgeschichtlich*, ed. Andreas Gestrich, Peter Knoch, and Helga Merkel (Göttingen, 1988), 5–28, here 5.

13 Ute Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte: Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt/Main, 2004), 400–409; Ulrich Muhlack, “*Verstehen*,” in *Geschichte: Ein Grundkurs*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Görtz, 3rd ed. (Reinbek, 2007), 104–136, and Thomas Welskopp, “*Erklären, begründen, theoretisch begreifen*,” in *Ibid.*, 137–177.

14 Gerald D. Feldman, *Hugo Stinnes: Biographie eines Industriellen, 1870–1924* (München, 1998), ix.

Under the auspices of the cultural turn, which, to some extent, evolved as the critique of a social history exclusively privileging anonymous structures and processes, the subjective dimension of history experienced a powerful comeback. As different as they are, cultural approaches to the past are eventually all interested in the question of how social groups made sense out of the world they were living in, how they interpreted it as “meaningful,” and how this shaped, structured, defined and motivated their individual and collective actions in their world.¹⁵ This suggests, to quote Jo Burr Margadant, that if historians want “to understand how people assume the identity that situates and motivates them in relation to others, it is necessary to grasp the symbolic world from which they construct meaning in their lives.”¹⁶ This new focus on meaning-making and agency has produced a new interest in biography.

The “new biography,” however, is not just a simple return to the epistemology of historicism. Rather, the new biography incorporates approaches from the fields of poststructuralist criticism, narratology, discourse analysis as well as media and communication studies to re-conceptualize biography and autobiography as acts of meaning making in those processes of social communication through which social groups negotiate their notions of reality, their perspective on their environment, and their place in the world. Furthermore, in questioning the very premises, paradigms, and traditions of biography that were developed from the lives and deeds of white, male, western, “great men,” feminist criticism, ethnic studies and post-colonial theory have fundamentally changed our understanding of “biography-worthy” historical actors and thus dramatically enlarged the spectrum of possible biographical subjects.

Together with this went a new interest in the narrativity and textuality of biography as acts of meaning-making through narration. Already in 1985, Ira Bruce Nadel argued that biographies were first and foremost “verbal artefacts of narrative discourse” through which the biographer as narrator created the historical subject, using certain narrative techniques, stylistic devices, thematic tropes, etc.¹⁷ The overall development of biography in the context of repeated paradigm shifts that I have sketched out so far is a general one that applies to academic historiography in America and Europe alike. Still, there are some remarkable differences relating to the debate about biography in the academic cultures of Germany and the U.S. that strike me as particularly noteworthy for this transatlantic panel here today.

15 Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte*; Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, 4th ed. (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2010).

16 Margadant, *The New Biography*, 4.

17 Nadel, *Biography*, 8.

In the specific context of Germany's academic culture, the crisis of biography was the manifestation of a much larger crisis of historicism that was an integral part of the intellectual founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. The historicist tradition continued to dominate West German historiography well into the 1960s. Then, under the lead of historians like Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Thomas Nipperdey, Jürgen Kocka and others, the profession took its "social history turn," which unfolded as a fundamental critique of historicism in *all* its aspects: as *weltanschauung*, as concept of history and as method.¹⁸ The founders of German social history aimed at establishing a historiography "jenseits des Historismus," and their critique of historicism was all-encompassing.¹⁹ It aimed at both the epistemology and the politics of historicism.

Not only was the method of "verstehen," focusing on individuality and the historically specific, thoroughly discredited, but the whole conceptual and theoretical cathedral of historicism was knocked down because — in the wake of National Socialism and the Holocaust — historicism was held to be an essentially authoritarian and anti-democratic tradition focusing on monarchs, statesmen and an abstract *raison d'état*, which, for the leading social historians, helped explain the rise and success of the Third Reich in Germany. The German social history project, therefore, unfolded as a radical critique of Germany's national history, and this was seen to be the necessary precondition for a thorough democratization of Germany. But ironically enough, the criticism of historicism from the spirit of liberalism and democracy led to an outright hostility to biography as the kind of historiography that was to be overcome by the new social history.

In the U.S., there was never a similar war against historicism like that in Germany.²⁰ Rather, the historicist tradition remained relatively

18 Thomas Kroll, "Sozialgeschichte," in *Geschichtswissenschaften: Eine Einführung*, ed. Christoph Cornelißen (Frankfurt/Main, 2000), 149–161; Georg G. Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft: Eine Kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassungen von Herder bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna, 1997), 400–413; Volker Sellin and Wolfgang Schieder, eds., *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland*, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 1986–87); Thomas Welskopp, "Die Sozialgeschichte der Väter: Grenzen und Perspektiven der Historischen Sozialwissenschaft," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 24 (1998): 173–198; Thomas Mergel and Thomas Welskopp, eds., *Geschichte zwischen Kultur und Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Theoriedebatte* (München, 1997); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 1, *Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur Defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära, 1700–1815* (München, 1987), 6–31; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Die Herausforderung der Kulturgeschichte* (München, 1998), 7–13; "Von der Volksgeschichte zur Strukturgeschichte: Die Anfänge der westdeutschen Sozialgeschichte 1945–1968," ed. Lutz Raphael, special issue, *Comparativ* 12 (2002): 7–62; Jin-Sung Chun, *Das Bild der Moderne in der Nachkriegszeit: Die westdeutsche "Strukturgeschichte" im Spannungsfeld von Modernitätskritik und wissenschaftlicher Innovation 1948–1962* (München, 2000).

19 Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Die Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf, 1972).

20 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988); John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 1989); Michael Kraus and Davis D. Joyce, *The Writing of American History* (Norman, Okla., 1990); Michael G. Kannen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980); Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 1990); Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Ian R. Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890–1970* (Chicago, 2005);

Robert Allen Rutland, ed., *Clio's Favorites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945–2000* (Columbia, Mo., 2000); Robert Allen Skotheim, *American Intellectual Histories and Historians* (Westport, Conn., 1978); Gerald N. Grob and Athan Billias, eds., *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, 4th ed. (New York, 1982).

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unbroken even under the onslaught of social history. A majority of U.S. historians continued to want to jump beneath historical actors' skins, to read sources with the aim of "understanding" them and to reconstruct the past "as it actually was."²¹ After 1945, therefore, the best Rankeans lived and worked in the U.S., largely due to the fact that American historians had applied historicism as a *weltanschauung* and a concept of history to the study of a democracy from the start.²² That is why biography, too, although it has also suffered from marginalization over the last four decades or so in the United States, was never as discredited as it was in Germany.

In addition, one should point out that over the last fifty years the world of academic historiography in the U.S. has been so much larger and so much more diverse and pluralistic than the German one that it was close to impossible for any single approach or school to dominate the whole profession. It was very different in Germany, where due to size and the pressures for homogeneity, a single approach was able to dominate the scene to a degree that scholars in the United States can scarcely imagine. Therefore, while writing a biography was a career-killer in Germany well into the 1980s, in the U.S. there continued to be a large and highly differentiated market for the biographical genre. The genre was prominently featured in the mass media, while in academia the study of biography was firmly institutionalized with institutes, academic journals and associations dedicated to biographical studies. A culture based on individualism and the celebration of individual agency is obviously particularly prone to embrace the biographical genre.

The continued popularity and presence of biography in the American context, however, stood in stark contrast to the theoretical endeavors in the field. Not much was happening on the theoretical front prior to the late 1970s. This was largely due to the fact that historical biography in American academia stood — and in many respects continues to stand — in the long shadow of Leon Edel, who in *Writing Lives* had theorized the model of "secret-self biography." First developed in the 1950s, and drawing heavily on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Edel saw the biographer's task as excavating the private, arguing that the hidden self of a biographical subject, including personality, character and "inner mental core," provided all the answers desired to questions about why a historical subject acted the way he did.²³ Biographers following Edel's model therefore wanted to discover the "figure under the carpet," the hidden myth of a life. This methodological

21 Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 33/34, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (Leipzig, 1874), vii.

22 Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York, 1984); Peter Charles Hoffer, *Liberty or Order: Two Views of American History from the Revolutionary Crisis to the Early Works of George Bancroft and Wendell Phillips* (New York, 1988); David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (Stanford, Calif., 1959); Andreas R. Klose, *Dogmen demokratischen Geschichtsdenkens: Monumentalistische Nationalgeschichtsschreibung in den USA* (Würzburg, 2003).

23 Leon Edel, "The Figure under the Carpet," in *Telling Lives*, ed. March Pachter (Washington, 1979); Leon Edel, *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (New York, 1984).

approach was defined by conscientious work with the sources, thick description and participant observation that walked a very fine line between empathy and scholarly detachment, with the overall aim being to enable a “truly human figure” to emerge from the pages of a biography.²⁴

Against this long and lasting tradition of the “secret-self biography,” the project of a “new biography” began to unfold in the 1980s-1990s, which, as Leonard Cassuto argues, has expanded the “range of American biographical practice in general.”²⁵ The formation of this new biography in the U.S. was driven by several factors, two of which were most important. The first one emerged from the pluralization of agents, actors and voices in American history in the wake of the Civil Rights Revolution of the 1960s-1970s. The resulting willingness to “weave the stories of new groups into our national fabric” has led to a significant broadening of the biographical spectrum under the auspices of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.²⁶

The second major factor behind the formation of a “new biography” was the impact of poststructuralism on the humanities, which occurred much earlier and was much more powerful in the U.S. than in Germany or in Europe in general. The poststructuralist epistemological revolution has invalidated some of the central assumptions traditional biography in the historicist tradition rested on. The new biography no longer treats individuals as “historical facts.” It has abandoned ideas of coherent and stable selves, and it is no longer looking for an underlying pattern or motif that serves as an organizing principle for a person’s life. Rather, accepting the elusive openness of individual selves and allowing for fluidity and multiple identities, it is much more interested in the narrativity, practices, uses, performances and functions of biography as processes of meaning-making and social self-description. The “new biography,” therefore, is keenly aware of the socially contested nature of identity constructions, so that it treats biography as acts of identity politics in the social struggles of a time.²⁷ This is the point where the experience of pluralization and multi-culturalism and the poststructuralist epistemology meet.

III. The Challenges of Biography

So, where do we go from here? It should have become clear that the problem of biography is not biography per se but the premises we base it on, the conceptual frameworks we use to approach it, and the

24 Shirley A. Leckie, “Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies More Than Ever,” in *Writing Biography*, ed. Ambrosius, 1-26, here 4.

25 Cassuto, “The Silhouette and the Secret Self,” 1260.

26 Leckie, “Biography Matters,” 20.

27 Margadant, *The New Biography*, 9; Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion,” 300.

questions we raise. In this context, I want to suggest three things for our biographical endeavors.²⁸

First, it seems promising to position our life-writing endeavors in a triangle of curriculum vita, biography and autobiography, i.e. the facts of a lived life, its narrative interpretation by a participant observer, and its narrative interpretation by the person who has lived this life. These three dimensions of the biographical are separate and yet related, and as historians we somehow have to come to grips with this complex interrelationship in a way that transcends the binary oppositions of fact and fiction.

Second, we should strive to systematically reflect the multiple functions and uses of biography, keeping in mind that biography is “not the same” over time, that it “does not perform the same tasks, at different times and in different places,” and that there are different national and regional traditions of biography.²⁹ In this context, one could analyze their functionality in memory and identity politics. One could also reflect their didactic purposes. Some biographies are written to either celebrate exemplary lives as models of a “good life” fit to be imitated, while others are to warn the audience by giving examples of a “bad life.” We should also not underestimate the simple pleasure and entertainment that can be drawn from reading or researching biographies. In many cases, biographical subjects offer examples of very interesting or fascinating lives, and the question might well be what exactly makes a certain life fascinating in a particular historical context. There are many more functions and uses of biography that come to mind the more one thinks about it.

What it all boils down to — and this is my third and final point — is to systematically analyze the communicative pragmatics of biography in a given historical context. This means reflecting on biography as an act of social communication through which social groups reach an understanding about who they are and who they want to be. Approaching biography from this communicative angle would also offer the chance of relating these groups’ textuality and narrativity to the social contexts in which they functioned.

This would help us to think of biography — and here I am referring to Thomas Etzemüller — as both an instrument for observing the world and an act of social self-description through which knowledge is constructed.³⁰ As such, biography is both a universal cultural phenomenon and a phenomenon particular to certain cultures, certain regions and certain times.

28 The following is more fully developed in Volker Depkat, “Ein schwieriges Genre: Zum Ort der Biografie in der Arbeitergeschichte,” *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 45 (2011): 21–35.

29 France and St. Clair, “Introduction,” 4.

30 Etzemüller, *Biographien*, 21–22.

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