

## Notes on Facing *The Biographical Illusion* Without Getting Lost in the Process

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### Abstract

This article claims that biography is an area of knowledge. The argument is formulated by examining the epistemological gaps identified by Pierre Bourdieu in his harsh criticism of this genre. It also analyzes the conceptual and methodological arguments that defenders of biography (such as Franco Ferrarotti, François Dosse, and Giovanni Levi) have made to place this genre at the heart of innovative trends in the humanities. The goal of this study is to show both the epistemological and hermeneutic potential of biography without risking the centrality of the individual's freedom in constructing historical analysis.

**Keywords:** biography, epistemology, hermeneutics, biographical illusion

## Introduction

Of the influential social scientists of the twentieth century, Pierre Bourdieu was perhaps the one who most emphatically denounced the epistemological problems of biography. His criticisms of the practice were so acute that there is hardly a researcher who engages in this kind of study that can afford to overlook them. Even those of them who do not share his theoretical perspectives have to take his criticisms into account. This is because, ironically, in Bourdieu's supposed refutation of biography we can find ways out of the epistemological pitfalls that have forever hindered the discipline. Hence, while Bourdieu denies biography any relevance, this article attempts to discuss his objections in order to explore alternatives that enable us to overcome them. That is, it seeks to create a balance of the criticisms that he has raised in order to show alternative approaches that can make the biographical genre a field with greater heuristic and hermeneutic possibilities.

To develop these ideas, this article is divided into four parts, followed by a brief conclusion. The first describes the objections that Bourdieu expressed towards biographical research. The second and third parts, which are supported using other authors, examine a series of responses to such objections and at the same time outline some methodological alternatives for biographical practice. In the fourth part, a didactic exercise is conducted which describes the research of an imaginary biographer in order to demonstrate how we might deal with *the biographical illusion* without getting lost in the process.

## Biography: A Genre Under Suspicion?

In several passages of his work, Pierre Bourdieu refers to biographical studies, but it is undoubtedly his article "The Biographical Illusion" (2004) which best consolidates his views on the subject. There, Bourdieu rejects any analytical relevance to biography or autobiography and affirms categorically that because it is based on an artificial creation of meaning, it is an absurdity. Bourdieu claims that biography suffers from a dangerous problem of subjectivism that leads biographers into a series of illusions with no escape. Thus, he denounces the ambiguous relationship established between the biographer and the biographical subject, in the sense that the former, in an attempt to give an interpretive coherence to the existence of the latter, tends to become an ideologist and accomplice of the subject's life. In writing about the autobiographer, Bourdieu states with a combative tone:

This inclination toward making oneself the ideologist of one's own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose, and through the creation of casual or final links between them which will make them coherent, is reinforced by the biographer who is naturally inclined, especially through his formation as a professional interpreter, to accept this artificial creation of meaning. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 298)

To summarize Bourdieu, the subjective implications of biography would eventually lead the researcher to a series of illusions. The first is believing that a person's existence has a particular unique character, one which in its singularity expresses its own historicity, as if the distinct trajectory of a person's life could account for an unrepeatable historical process and were not actually the product of structural constraints that also weigh on the social categories of individuals. The second illusion is pretending that the trajectory of an individual's life has a linear chronological evolution, in which successive events are tied to each other and directed toward the fulfillment of an ultimate purpose, thus falling into the fallacy of a teleological,

monocausal process. The third consists in assuming that, just as with someone's name which does not change in the course of a lifetime, the person also enjoys a unitary identity capable of remaining stable regardless of circumstance, time or place. In doing so, we would be denying the plurality of identities that a person has – always dynamic and frequently contradictory – which in effect a person possesses. In short, these illusions would lead the biographer to presume that the biographical subject has a coherent life trajectory, one that would endow the subject with an implicit intentionality that impels his or her existence towards the fulfillment of supreme goals that, of course, the biographer knows beforehand. Furthermore, the prior knowledge that biographers have of the end of their subject's life would lead them to force impossible connections to unrelated events with the objective of giving overall coherence, thus falling into essentialism. For all these reasons, Bourdieu denies a disciplinary character to biography as an area of knowledge, concluding emphatically:

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 just 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, that is the matrix of objective relations between different stations. (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 302)

The metaphor of "a subway route without taking into account the network structure" implies that Bourdieu requires the biographer to favor the study of the social structures that condition the actions of the individual. More precisely, Bourdieu argues that in order to escape subjectivism and the illusions that it entails, it is necessary to reconstruct the context in which the studied person behaves. This, in terms of his own theory, supposes before anything else an understanding of the successive states of the distinct fields in which the biographical subject's life unfolds. This, in turn, requires examining the objective relations that bind the biographical subject together with other subjects, at least in the relevant fields of the particular study. "This preliminary construction is also the condition of all rigorous evaluation of that which can be called the *social surface*, as rigorous description of the *personality* designated by the proper name." (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 302)

In another of his texts, Bourdieu continues with his quarrels about the disciplinary legitimacy of the biographical genre. We read what can be considered a proposal to overcome the epistemological problems described above. In his essay "Field of Power, Literary Field and Habitus", Bourdieu rails against Jean Paul Sartre's biographical study of Flaubert. He accuses the author of having lost himself in the illusions already described. For Bourdieu, Sartrean analysis depends on the endless and desperate attempt to integrate the entire objective truth of a condition, a history, and an individual work into the artificial unity of an original project: "Sartre seeks the genetic principle of Flaubert's work in the individual Gustave, in his infancy, in his first familial experiences" (Bourdieu, 1993)

Bourdieu vehemently defends the way in which, according to him, scientific work should be undertaken. He insists that the only methodological path for biography is based on a structural analysis of the relational systems that define the state of the fields and the different *habitus* that the agents possess due to their position in the social structure.

From Bourdieu's perspective, "fields" are social spaces that form around the evaluation of scientific, artistic, political, cultural, and other events. These are fields of power that establish objective social relations, in which individuals compete to occupy a place in the hierarchy

generated among actors who hold different types of capital – symbolic, political, economic, etc. In this sense, fields constitute within themselves and in their connection with other fields, networks of class relations where conflicts are generated over the acquisition of different types of capital. From this it follows that each field can achieve degrees of autonomy that compel them to compete with each other within the broader field of power, which encompasses the whole social structure.

In this interwoven network of social relations, individuals have a clearly defined position that conditions them to act within the limits of certain historical possibilities. That is to say, the objective situation that social agents occupy within distinct fields conditions them to certain types of behaviors and modes of feeling and thinking. The latter is what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, which consists of the social practices that individuals have acquired during their social formation: tastes, skills, language, and ways of expressing opinions and making decisions. In general, the *habitus* functions unconsciously, because it is a historical outcome, or rather, the way individuals synthesize society in themselves. Thus, the *habitus* simultaneously generates the reproduction of existing relations of domination and the possibility of transforming them. In other words, the *habitus* functions as a form of control for those atop the hierarchies of power and, on the other hand, gives those who are dominated the maneuvering room necessary to transform the social structure.

That being said, we can now understand why Bourdieu contends that biographical studies should start from the structural analysis of relational systems, since they would define the state of the fields and the *habitus* that actors take on due to their objective situation within them. From this point of view, it is clear that what is important for Bourdieu is to explain the *habitus* generated among groups of individuals who share similar positions within and between distinct fields. It follows that what is pertinent is not the individual, nor the particular events, but ultimately the structural conditions that produce behaviors and events between different groups of individuals. This is why Bourdieu unequivocally disqualifies Sartre's question about Flaubert, which is the same question nearly all biographers ask themselves about their subjects: How did John Doe become who he is? According to Bourdieu, this is a specious question because no individual is truly original, nor does any life conform to an implicit plan that must be fulfilled in a teleological way. What is important, in the case of an intellectual biography, which is Bourdieu's example, is to ask: From the point of view of the socially constituted *habitus*, what should be the various categories of artists and writers in a given society, in order to occupy the positions pre-arranged for them by the intellectual field, and consequently, to be able to adopt aesthetic or ideological stances objectively linked to the occupied positions? "Then, we must completely reverse the procedure and ask, not how a writer comes to be what he is, in a sort of genetic psycho-sociology, but rather how the position or 'post' he occupies – that of a writer of a particular type- became constituted." (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 162)

Consistent with this question, and taking the intellectual experiences of the writer investigated by Sartre as an example, Bourdieu proposes that the answer should come from an analysis divided into several stages that would be woven into it. Like a three-stroke engine, its method would be as follows. The first stage would analyze the objective position occupied by the intellectuals in the structure of the dominant class, taking into account the type of connection that they bear to that position, namely whether they belong to it, either by origin or by condition.

This would be followed by an examination of the objective relations between the various groups of intellectuals within the structure of the intellectual field, taking into account the disputes generated by the legitimacy of certain intellectual currents in a given era. This in turn

presupposes establishing the particular rationale that governs in the historical moment in question, both the intellectual field and the field of power as a whole. As will be recalled, all fields exist in the field of power, which is why we must also analyze the degree of autonomy that the intellectual field has reached with respect to other fields and, in particular, to that of power. Only by analyzing the preceeding conditions might we understand the possible range of action that belonging to the subject's category, that is, the *habitus* that the subject belongs to as a result of his or her location in this structural system of social relations.

Consequently, the third stage would be to reconstruct the *habitus*, which is what would ultimately allow us to know the set of practices and ideologies, the ways of thinking and acting prevalent in the distinct categories of the field being studied. This would not only help to explain the work and actions of the biographical character, but also – and this is undoubtedly very important for Bourdieu's analysis – to understand the distinct groups of intellectuals existing in the period in question, the position they have in the social structure and, therefore, their ideological and creative possibilities. The working margin of different intellectual groups to act would be conditioned by the degree of autonomy reached by the intellectual field against the field of power, dominated in the modern era by the different fractions of the bourgeoisie. Thus, since intellectuals tend to display a material and political dependence on dominant bourgeois groups, their actions show degrees of independence only insofar as they achieve autonomy in their field. This independence is possible by virtue of the development of a market for symbolic goods, with the ability to impose its own sanctions and which would allow a wider margin of action for intellectuals.

Following Bourdieu, it could be said that in order to escape the traps that biography entails, one must study the social structure that conditions the thoughts and actions of the biographical subject. Undoubtedly, this is an objectivist claim. It bears repeating: one must reconstruct the network of objective social relations that governs the subject and the other actors of the same group, who like the subject have the same possibilities within the social structure. This would be what Bourdieu proposes to overcome the biographical illusion. This is, to break the complicity that biographers assume with their biographical subject when they attempt to give coherence to a life by creating an artificial sense of an existence that has nothing permanent in it but the name that appears on the birth certificate, if that.

### **Regarding Bourdieu's Critiques of the Biographical Genre**

There is no denying that Pierre Bourdieu twisted his knife into the wound of biography. His critiques go straight to the heart of the genre's fundamental epistemological snafus. Except for the most naïve traditional biographers and radical postmodernists, few social scientists would dare overlook the fact that biographical research is riddled with traps, rightly labeled illusions by Bourdieu. And so, rather than seek to invalidate his assertions, we must take them as a series of additional challenges to face in the difficult work of biography. For this reason, the objective of this section is to assume Bourdieu's critiques as a starting point to search out escapes from the labyrinth that biographical practice creates.

That there exists an extreme subjectivist implication on the part of the biographer with respect to the biographical subject is certain. Likewise, it is true that the biographer is caught up in the fantasy of wanting the biographical life to contain an absolute history with a proper beginning and end, chronologically linear, like a continuous process that conceals a teleological development. The above implies an attempt to give coherence to the life of the subject, when it is certain that all human existence is discontinuous, discordant and plural. To try to do

otherwise would be to slip into essentialism, for the attempt to give coherence to a life necessarily forces a preconceived logic in the selection of events. This is even truer when biographers have prior knowledge of what their biographical subject has become, which tempts them to show the achievement of goals that were to be accomplished. In this way, biographers manufacture a wholesale fiction in which the narrated history would be like the movement of a closed circle, of the trajectory of an individual who came into the world to fulfill certain objectives, like a predestined Messiah.

Nevertheless, if we follow Bourdieu word for word, we would be renouncing the entire genre of biography, since from his perspective biographical research ends up being radically invalidated. This is clear not only from the critiques that Bourdieu makes, but also in the alternative that he proposes to escape the biographical illusion. This alternative consists, as we have seen, in privileging the study of structural logics as a way to understand individual practices, or rather, to explain the behavior of social groups where subjects would only be examples that serve to verify social norms. That is why Sartre's Flaubert had no relevance to Bourdieu's study except for the objective relations in which he was involved in a social field. This is clear if we remember the metaphor that Bourdieu uses regarding a subway ride: to convey the life of an individual is as absurd as explaining a subway trip without having knowledge of the network's structure.

While Bourdieu's criticisms are relevant, it is difficult to support him in the alternative he provides for the epistemological problems he observes in biography. Accepting his solution would be to trade the risk of subjectivism for the reductivist risk of structuralism, the latter of which would certainly crush the case for biographical studies. Put more colloquially, it would be like prescribing a cure that is worse than the disease, for the medicine would end up killing the patient, or in the case of the biographical genre, eliminating what is unique to it: its subjectivity, its concern for the particular, its irreducible anti-nomothetic character, and its historicity. As François Dosse (2007) says in support of those who criticize Bourdieu's alternative, "the objective is, therefore, to objectify subjectivity and subjectify objectivity"<sup>1</sup> (p. 213). This would be a way out of the false dilemma between the individual-structural, subjective-objective, particular-general, and so on.

In an attempt to go beyond these strict dichotomies, Dosse argues that it is necessary to understand that a good alternative for biography would be to use theoretical models that are not rigid, that is, dynamic and flexible approaches capable of capturing biographical trajectories without losing sight of structural dynamics. Thus we might overcome both the problems of subjectivity and the impoverishment that structuralist schemes bring into the analysis of a particular life (Dosse, F. 2007, pp. 213–215). Dosse accepts the criticism against Bourdieu's biographical subjectivism from a perspective that conceives biography as privileged terrain for experimentation. Instead of seeing this criticism as an epistemological outlet, however, he perceives it as a watershed vital to humanizing the human sciences. Conscious of the empathy that biographers experience with their biographical subject, one which necessarily transforms both during the research process, Dosse states:

If we take Paul Ricœur's beautiful demonstration that selfhood (*Ipse*) is constructed not in a repetition of itself (*Idem*) but in its relation with another, biographical writing is very close to that movement towards another and from the alteration of the self to the construction of a self transformed into another.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

Obviously, such an adventure entails risks: between the loss of one's identity and the loss of the singularity of the biographical subject, the biographer must know how to keep his or her distance. (Dosse, F. 2007, p. 14)

For Dosse, it is clear that since the late eighties, the openness of the human sciences has made it possible to resolve epistemological problems that were previously thought intractable for biographical studies: the crisis of rigid structuralist approaches and mechanical schemes of interpretation; new questions about human action – individual and collective – about subject, identity and singularity in history; and advances in cultural history, including a preoccupation with the subject of narrative, studies on the relationship between science and fiction, changes of scale in social analysis, and a renewed interest in case studies. These are some of the elements that make biographical research more relevant than ever. Moreover, Dosse claims that it is precisely the hybrid character of biography – with its promiscuous relationship between social science and literature-, that can provide many of the answers to the questions that are at the center of social-scientific debates today.

In this sense, Dosse assumes the problems identified by Bourdieu, but without renouncing the epistemological aporias that belong to the biographical genre, of which we would expect a certain necessary tension to stimulate experimentation and investigative creativity. Dosse also accepts that we must break with the biographical concepts that conceive of a person's life as unitary and coherent, chronologically linear and falsely teleological – but only as long as we do not give up studying the individual's singularity and his or her capacity for social action and freedom. Using research examples that have examined the multiple and plural nature of the human being from an interdisciplinary perspective, Dosse shows that it is not only valid to speak of the different meanings of a subject and his or her different identities, but also that it is possible to use certain forms of heterochrony to alter the linear parameters of classical biographies, that is to say, through presentations that convey the time and the studied themes in a fragmented and variable way, which would not only allow a better approximation of the studied individual's life – which always contains multiple levels, changes, interruptions, continuities, and setbacks – but also a better representation of the fragmentary character of the sources themselves.

### **Ferrarotti**

For his part, Franco Ferrarotti has defended the autonomy of the biographical method, and this defense is worth highlighting. In a text published around the same time as “The Biographical Illusion,” but from a quite different perspective, Ferrarotti contends that if we want to make use of the full heuristic potential of the biographical genre, we must abandon the objectivist postulates of the traditional scientific method and seek instead the specific epistemology of biography. For Ferrarotti, this specificity comes from the subjective implications of the genre, which are precisely what gives biography a potential value as an area of study to further knowledge. In this regard, the Italian sociologist writes:

The biographical method seeks to attribute a value of knowledge to *subjectivity*. A biography is subjective on several levels. It reads social reality from the point of view of a historically specified individual. It is based on material elements that most of the time are autobiographical, therefore exposed to the innumerable deformations of a subject-object that are observed and rediscovered. It is often situated within the framework of a personal interaction (interview). In the case of any biographical account, this interaction is much narrower and more complex than the observer-observed relationships admitted by the Method: co-optation of

the observer into the truth of the observed, reciprocal manipulative mechanisms that are difficult to control, absence of objective reference points, and so on.<sup>2</sup> (Ferraroti, F. 1993, p. 128)

Beginning with biography's overexposure to subjectivity, Ferrarotti (1993) arrives by his own means to a conclusion similar to that of Paul Ricœur. He claims that the biographer is necessarily implicated in the field of the biographical subject, who, far from being a passive object, transforms his or her observer in the research process, and in turn, is transformed as well: "This circular feedback process ridicules any presumption of objective knowledge. Knowledge has no object to the other; its object is the inextricable and reciprocal interaction between the observer and the observed" (p. 129). This explains the subjective empathies between the biographer and the biographical subject. Ferrarotti also attempts to answer the question of how to produce knowledge in this genre of study without evading the subject's centrality and the specific historicity that he or she possesses.

He proposes an alternative that supports the validity of the sixth of Marx's *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach*: "... the essence of every man ... is in his reality, the ensemble of social relations" (Ferraroti, F. 1993, p. 134). Namely, that every human praxis is a synthetic activity, "... active totalization of a whole social context. A life is a praxis that appropriates social relations (social structures), internalizes them and retranslates them into psychological structures by its structuring-restructuring activity" (Ferraroti, F. 1993, p. 134). This singular retranslation consists in the reappropriation of the historical context that an individual uniquely creates from his or her own social experience. For the biographer, this presupposes access to a reality based on the irreducible specificity of a person or, what is essentially the same, of this person's individual practices and subjective experiences.

From this approach, Ferrarotti fights any determinism or social mechanism without renouncing the study of structural relations. In this way, individuals cannot be interexchanged, even though they share experiences in the same social group, since it is understood that individuals mediate the time and society they are born into through their own subjective dimensions. Here the metaphor of the subway ride loses its validity, since the emphasis of the study is placed just as much on the subject's freedom of action as on structural conditions. That is, the individual is not seen as a passive reflection of the social structure, but rather as a singular product of it, with ample possibilities of transforming it via the filter of the individual's subjective vision of the world.

Moreover, it calls significant attention to the fact that both Bourdieu and Ferrarotti base their conflicting points of view on Sartre, even if the former uses him to demonstrate the absurdity of biography and the latter to highlight its exceptional possibilities. Bourdieu and Ferrarotti, though writing at much the same time, give diametrically opposed readings of the approach defended by Sartre. The possibility that there can be two such divergent readings of the Sartrean biographical method rests on the fact that Sartre himself hits the mark in certain propositions but errs in others. This situation allowed Bourdieu to make use of the erratic Sartre and Ferrarotti of the accurate one, with neither of them paying much attention to the other side of Sartre's approach, that is, to that which would invalidate their own argument.

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

## Sartre

As seen above, Bourdieu's example to invalidate biographical studies is taken from Sartre's biography of Gustave Flaubert, which endeavors to explain how the writer came to be, based on the search for a certain identity formed in the earliest stages of his life, one which determined the rest of his existence: Sartre says that some aspects of Flaubert's character "can be explained if we understand that everything took place *in childhood*; that is, in a condition radically distinct from the adult condition. It is childhood which sets up unsurpassable prejudices" (Sartre, 1963, pp. 59–60). Ideas such as this, which are based on Freudian psychoanalysis, are what Bourdieu uses to show that biography is founded on an artificial creation of coherence that bestows the subject with an unshakeable identity, which leads the subject to fulfill the goals of a destiny, taking the form of a particular story and with a false teleological development.

The problem with the Sartrean approach is that it places too much emphasis on the early experiences of childhood, which are only as decisive as events that occur in other stages of life. The emphasis that Sartre places on the childhood of his subject is what undoubtedly causes him to lose his way in the biographical illusion.<sup>3</sup> But it does not follow that his entire approach is flawed, since the root problem that interests him are the possibilities of choice and freedom that individuals possess. This seems to be what genuinely annoys Bourdieu, who despite evidencing a certain interest in individual action, highlights above all in his works the structural conditions that weigh upon the actions of those individuals.

Sartre defends the capacity of individual freedom from a perspective that qualifies as Marxist dialectic as much as it does existentialism. His perspective attacks any type of theoretical model that, in its eagerness to see conceptual postulates confirmed, reduces the concrete experiences of subjects to simple structural determinations. This is why Sartre (1963) advocates a "living Marxism," rather than what he calls a loose Marxism, universalist and a priori, of which, like other structuralist theories, the "sole purpose is to force the events, the persons, or the acts considered into prefabricated molds" (p. 37). Moreover, in anticipating critics such as Bourdieu, Sartre writes:

But it would be a mistake to accuse us of introducing the irrational here, of inventing a "first beginning" unconnected with the world, or of giving to man a freedom-fetish. This criticism, in fact, could only issue from a mechanist philosophy; those who would direct it at us do so because they would like to reduce *praxis*, creation, invention, to the simple reproduction of the elementary given of our life. It is because they would like to explain the work, the act, or the attitude by the factors which condition it; their desire for explanation is a disguise for the wish to assimilate the complex to the simple, to deny the specificity of structures, and to reduce change to identity. This is to fall back again to the level of scientific determinism." (Sartre, 1963, p. 133).

Indeed, it is this Sartre as defender of the individual's freedom to act that Ferrarotti makes use of, the Sartre that maintains:

But without living men, there is no history. The object of existentialism—due to the default of the Marxists—is the particular man in the social field, in his class,

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<sup>3</sup> Sartre's emphasis on childhood to explain an individual's life trajectory can also be seen in his autobiography, which focuses on his own childhood. See: Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York: George Braziller, 1964).

in an environment of collective objects and of other particular men. It is the individual, alienated, reified, mystified, as he has been made to be by the division of labor and by exploitation, but struggling against alienation with the help of distorting instruments and, despite everything, patiently gaining ground. (Sartre, 1963, p. 151).

In order to study the individual in this way, Sartre (1963) proposes a model that he calls progressive-regressive and analytic-synthetic. These terms imply a simultaneous analysis that moves between the social system and the particular trajectory of the subject, in a sort of back and forth pendulum motion, which seeks to achieve a structural and historical approximation both of the individual and of the society. Sartre summarizes his approach as follows: “It is at the same time an enriching cross-reference between the object (which contains the whole period as hierarchized significations) and the period (which contains the object in its totalization)” (p. 148). As can be seen, Sartre’s methodology does not reject the study of structural conditions; on the contrary, it appeals to them but on the condition that they can be studied through the singular experience of the subject or of the particular meaning of an event.

Sartre’s proposal of a living, dialectical and existentialist Marxism seems as necessary as the heuristic analysis of events and individuals. He also argues for a move toward the concrete from a heuristic perspective. This allows us to *understand* both the particular meaning of the events and what the social structures in general reveal. In this sense, it must be understood that this methodology is based on comprehensive procedures, or rather, hermeneutic ones, that seek to establish not only the real circumstances of the events and of the individuals but also their historical significance of them. In this vein, Ferrarotti (2003) comments: “This methodology does not reject the contribution of nomothetic knowledge: it requires it to integrate in a heuristic movement with non-linear hermeneutical models that appeal to dialectical reason and not to formal reason” (p. 140). This position, which is at once heuristic and hermeneutic, is a reliable alternative for biographical studies, which will be treated in greater detail at the end of the final section of this article.

### **“The Normal Exception”: A Methodological Alternative for Biography**

#### **Levi**

Giovanni Levi, one of the most renowned representatives of Italian microhistory, warned in a 1989 article (the year “The Biographical Illusion” was published) that biography was at the center of the methodological problems of contemporary historiography, specifically: those related to interdisciplinary work, those inquiring about the relations between history and storytelling, those that debate about changes of scale in the analysis, those related to the nexus between rules and social practices and, perhaps most important, those that discuss the complexities of understanding the limits of human freedom of action and rationality (Livi, G. 2014, pp. 61–62). In his article, Levi provides reason for the critiques raised by Bourdieu, but does not follow them in his proposal. He considers Bourdieu’s ideas on biography to be closed without truly moving beyond structuralist approaches. He means that Bourdieu’s perspective only offers an interest in the subject as long as it exemplifies representative statistical practices, that is, typical forms of conduct or behavior. This would be evident in the relationship between the *habitus* of the group and the *habitus* of the individual studied by the sociologist, which requires the researcher to select events that would be common and measurable within the styles of a social field. Referring to Bourdieu, Giovanni Levi writes:

This approach contains a few functionalistic elements in the identification of the norms and style which belong to the group and in the alienations and abnormalities rejected as not significant. Pierre Bourdieu addresses both the question of determinism and the conscious choice, but the conscious choice is more recongnized than defined and the accent seems to lie on the deterministic and unconscious aspects. (Livi, G. 2014, pp. 67–68).

As can be seen, Levi – and, in fact, the whole strain of Italian microhistory – does not agree with the decentralization of the subject that the structuralist theories end up suggesting. On the contrary, this strain of historians defends the irreducible character of the individual. Without falling into extreme relativism, Giovanni Levi proposes an approach to biography where the central questions are individual freedom of action and the system of norms in which it operates. Recall that there is no normative system which is sufficiently structured; there are always inconsistencies and fissures in the social structures that allow for the conscious action of individuals, the negotiation of rules, and even their manipulation.

Based on the above, Levi states that the researcher must deepen the study of the type of rationality put into practice by the subjects, since this is never absolute, nor do all individuals possess the same cognitive dispositions, nor the same information, nor do they all act according to the same calculation, nor obey the same decision-making process; nor do they guide their actions exclusively to obtain maximum benefits. Humans are never entirely rational. Rationality, Levi states, is limited and selective, so its definition must be investigated to avoid reductions of the kind that equate the rationality of an individual to that of a category or social group. He writes:

One cannot deny that an age has its own style, a custom which is the result of shared and repeated experiences, just as every age recognizes a group with its own style. But there exists for every individual significant room for freedom which has its origin precisely in the incoherence of the social surface and which gives life to social change. One cannot, then, attribute the same cognitive procedures to groups and individuals; and the specific character of each individual's practices cannot be treated as if they make no difference and have no importance. (Livi, G. 2014, p. 74).

### **Ginzburg**

The approach proposed by Levi can be read as a defense and, at the same time, as a systematization of what was done in 1973 by Carlo Ginzburg in his now classic book *The Cheese and the Worms*. In that study, many of Levi's hypotheses were already implicit through the biographical approach of the "borderline case". As is well known, Carlo Ginzburg studied Menocchio, a sixteenth-century Italian miller, and examined his special rationality during a time of deep cultural mutation. It is, therefore, not a study on the life of an average individual; on the contrary, it is a singular person in a particular moment, that is, in an extreme situation or a structural crisis. In this sense, what was considered problematic in biography becomes a virtue, because through the particular subjectivity of an individual in a situation with structural discontinuities, Ginzburg seeks access to widely propagated social practices. At first glance, this appears to be a contradiction, which is why it is better to read what exactly Ginzburg asserts:

Even a [borderline] case (and Menocchio is certainly this) can be representative: in a negative sense, because it helps to explain what should be understood, in a

given situation, as being “in the statistical majority”; or, positively, because it permits us to define the latent possibilities of something (popular culture) otherwise known to us only through fragmentary and distorted documents. (Ginzbug 1980, p. 21)

The paradox found in this method can be translated thus: a borderline case also contains regularity, a structural norm, but in a state of continuous and unpredictable movement; it views the general from the particular, and in a process of transformation. This is a change of scale in order to observe social phenomena. Nor does it abandon the study of the subjective, the different types of rationality, or the particular. Neither does it abandon the study of the general, much less the inquiry into the many structural factors. After all, the case of Menocchio shows an individual who, despite his undeniable singularity, also had attitudes similar to those in his peer groups, who shared the same popular culture and class experiences.

Referring to this approach years after the appearance of *The Cheese and the Worms*, a group of Italian microhistorians described this study as the “normal exception.”<sup>4</sup> With this it should be emphasized that the idea was to simultaneously study the exception and the norm: the particular case and the structure. That is to say, the biographies created with microhistory had to account for a dual movement: the way in which exceptionality breaks structural constraints and, at the same time, the way in which structural constraints operate on that exceptionality – all seen from the perspective of a particular concrete and well-defined case.

The richness of this perspective is based on the following aspects. First, the subject once again has relevance. Second, different types of rationality, both individual and collective, can be observed. Third, understanding the capacity for action and freedom of individuals and social categories would not impoverish the effort, since the borderline case would point out strategies that break with common sense. Fourth, because this particular case is exceptional, that is, by condensing the features of a group in a contradictory way, there would be more room for examining what is unpredictable, incoherent, and pluralistic in people. This last point takes biography away from its classic narrative strategy, because it would necessarily have to break with the linear chronology in order to account for the plural aspects of an individual. Thus, without losing its own historicity, the biography would not have to be involved in an analysis that hides the illusion of a teleological development in the background.

### Biography: A Hermeneutic of Experience

*But who can guarantee that the order of the story is that of life? We are made of those illusions, dear master, as you know better than I.*

- Ricardo Piglia, *Artificial Respiration*, 33.

### Piglia

Although the text quoted above seems to have been taken from a dialogue between Pierre Bourdieu and some of his most experienced pupils, it is a comment made by Emilio Renzi to his uncle Marcelo Maggi, about “those illusions” contained in biography. Renzi and Maggi are two of the central characters in the novel *Artificial Respiration* by the Argentinian author, Ricardo Piglia (1994). Before engaging in literature, Piglia was a professionally trained

<sup>4</sup> Aside from the article quoted by Giovanni Levi on the history and the meaning of the “normal exception,” please also see Dosse, *La apuesta biográfica*, 254–276, as well as Justo Serna y Anacleto, *Cómo se escribe la microhistoria* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2000), 100–105.

historian, which allowed him to write his works from a *historical gaze*, to use an expression used by his character, Marcelo Maggi, when telling his nephew that it is necessary to understand individuals like leaves floating on the river of history. “We are but leaves floating on a river and must learn to look at what comes as if it had already happened. There will never be a Proust among the historians, which comforts me and should serve you as a lesson” (Piglia, 1994, p. 17) says Maggi to his nephew.<sup>5</sup>

For Marcelo Maggi, history must be understood as a river in continuous movement, in which it is necessary to look at the waters that have run before to find relations with the present: you have “to look at what is coming *as if it had already happened*.” This constant movement can also be found in individuals, who are like leaves that follow the wider flow of a river. In other words, the changes in individuals are also mapped through time and the wider movements of societies, revolutions, changes of mentalities, class relations, and so on. However, these subjects do not cease being themselves with their own specificities, like a particular leaf that advances on the currents of that river. Maggi is an insightful lawyer who has reached these conclusions in an attempt to write the biography of the nineteenth-century Argentine character, Enrique Ossorio, the alter ego of Enrique Lafuente, who in addition to being the private secretary of General Rosas was one of the founders of the Argentine *Salón Literario*, an important gathering space that gave rise to that country’s modern intelligentsia.

Like any historian involved in biography, Maggi encounters methodological hurdles that are difficult to leap over. Emilio Renzi, his nephew, describes some of these problems in the correspondence he maintains with his uncle:

...beyond the arguments we pretended to have from time to time, what emerged as the focus of Maggi’s correspondence with me was his work on Enrique Ossorio. He has been writing that book for a long time and the problems he was having began cropping up in his letters. I am like someone lost in his memory, he wrote me, lost in a forest, trying to find a path, tracing what remains of that life besides the proliferation of fragments and testimonies and notes, all the machinery of oblivion. I suffer the classic misfortune of the historians, Maggi wrote, although I am no more than an amateur. I suffer that classic misfortune: to desire possession of those documents so as to decipher the truth of life in them, only to discover that the documents have ended up taking possession of me, imposing their rhythms and chronology and peculiar truths on me. I dream about that man, he writes to me. (Piglia, 1994, p. 24)

Maggi is entangled in a situation that has led him to the problem of the biographical illusion. The situation, which is not negative but dangerous, consists of having been “lost in a jungle”: letting his biographical subject take over his inner self. The empathy he feels for his subject has driven him to be possessed by him. “I am lost in his memory,” “I dream of that man,” he bitterly confesses to his nephew when he realizes that the documents, that is, the recorded experiences of his biographical subject, “have taken possession of me and imposed their rhythms and chronologies and their particular truth.” Although it sounds pathetic, and the scene is indeed pathetic, we are faced with a situation that could resemble a *séance*, where the soul of the deceased takes over the body of the living to tell us about the deceased existence in the present. “Dedicated as you are to prying into the mystery of the life of other men (of one other

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<sup>5</sup> In many ways literature has produced more complex works to try to understand the problems contained in biographical practice. This article only deals with Piglia’s novel, but the reader can also consult such works as Barnes (1990), Auster (2006), Strachey (1988), Cabrera Infante (1998) and Nabokov (2008).

man, Enrique Ossorio), you have ended up resembling the object you investigate,” says Emilio Renzi to his uncle (Piglia, 1994, p. 88).

We are again faced with the epistemological dilemma denounced by Bourdieu, that is, the empathy that leads the biographer to a complicit relationship with the biographical subject. This tends, in turn, to become a search for total coherence in the life of the one being researched, as if it were a monocausal scheme, in the manner of a particular story replete with a certain univocal expression. Moreover, it is an illusion that expresses itself when putting an individual's life on paper, as if it could be reproduced in the structure of a text as it was actually lived. Therefore, to the question posed by Renzi, “but who can guarantee that the order of the story is that of life?” the answer must be “no one,” since in fact a *life lived* does not correspond to a *life written* on paper. Just to be clear, however, this cannot lead us to reject the relevance of biography as a genre to help us understand the past. As Renzi himself said: “We are made of those illusions, dear master, as you know better than I” (Piglia, 1994, p. 33). In fact, these illusions exist and one must know how to deal with them. They would even seem to be necessary in the process of creativity in biographical research.

The crux of the matter lies in not allowing these empathies to end up merging the personality of the biographer and the biographical subject into one and making them each lose their identity, or rather, to have the biographer fully identify with the biographical subject to the point of pretending, often unconsciously, to write an official story of this character. In order to avoid this situation, it is necessary to know how to maintain a critical distance from the studied individual and to allow an extremely ambitious attitude to encompass the whole life of the biographical subject, as if all actions and thoughts were keeping a correspondence with each other. The life of any person is full of multiple meanings. People are formed by various identities, which in turn are reflected in actions and thoughts that change over time, as well as being capable of becoming contradictory.

However, the alternative that Marcelo Maggi finds in his study is worth exploring here, because it supports and reinforces the ideas expressed earlier in this article. In another letter sent to his nephew, he writes: “I face difficulties of various kinds. First and foremost, it is clear that I do not intend to write what is called in the classic sense, a Biography. I am instead trying to show the movement of history contained in an essentially *eccentric life*” (Piglia, 1994, p. 28). Curiously, Maggi as a barely amateur historian has managed on his own to arrive at the same alternative proposed by the Italian microhistorians. By placing the word *eccentric* in italics, Maggi tries to highlight the ambiguous character of that word and the difficulty he has in expressing what it really means, since he understands the *eccentric life* of his character as an example that paradoxically contains singular elements that make it different: its irreducible subjectivity. But, at the same time, he understands that this eccentricity is only possible within the larger historical movement in which his character lived. As such, it could be said that Maggi winds up finding a Menocchio in Argentina. This is no joke, since, as we have already seen, it supports something similar to what Carlo Ginzburg defines in the concept of the borderline case (see previous section).

Nevertheless, Maggi continues: “I have several working hypotheses, each implying a different way of organizing the material and ordering the discussion. It is necessary, above all, to reproduce the *evolution* that defines Ossorio's existence, something very hard to capture. Opposed in *appearance* to the movement of history” (Piglia, 1994, p. 28). In this part, the italics once again try to express the ambiguity of the selected words. Thus, with the term *evolution*, rather than wanting to understand a linearity from beginning to end and following the

benchmarks of progress, Maggi wants to refer to the procedural and contradictory character of a particular life within the historical movement. The same can be said of the expression “opposite in *appearance*,” which suggests the fact that an individual has been able to go against the historical current, or the strongest currents of nineteenth century Argentine thought, but never ceases to be part of them. These currents of thought are the ones that in the end drive his thoughts and actions, as in the metaphor of the leaf that floats along the currents of the river.

Maggi is conscious that a linear or simply evolutionary narrative structure does not work in writing the life of his biographical subject when he says the following:

I am sure, besides, that the only way of capturing the sense that defines his destiny is to alter the chronology, to go backwards from the final madness to the moment when Ossorio takes part with the rest of the generation of Argentine romantics in founding the principles and bases of what we call the national culture. (Piglia, 1994, p. 29)

When Maggi speaks of that last element that defines the meaning of Ossorio’s existence, or when he says to look for that hidden something that defines the destiny of his biographical subject, we must understand that he is simply making use of the poetic resources of his particular speech. Such language, however, should not be understood to mean that he is in search of any essentialist or deterministic element in his research. In fact, what these words conceal, which so annoys social scientists, is the approach of a problem, which in an attempt to solve it permits a narrative coherence to the biography, not to the life of the biographical subject, which will always be contradictory and full of multiple identities. This is what Maggi knows but in the manner of a detective who pursues a criminal (and in biography, the biographer is always the criminal) and is on the hunt to solve conundrums that help to understand aspects of Ossorio’s life and the society in which he lived.

In this case, the biographer manages to account for the many vicissitudes of his subject’s life by showing the ambivalent nature of his personality and actions (Piglia, 1994, pp. 26–27). He shows that Ossorio was the son of a colonel from the Independence and that, in addition to studying law, he was very interested in philosophy, which later helped him obtain a position as the private secretary to Rosas. From here, he established clandestine networks with the exiled intellectuals of the time: Félix Frias, Sarmiento, Alberdi, Echeverría, Juan María Gutiérrez, among others. Maggi succeeds in establishing that Ossorio leaked private information of Rosas and his government to this group of exiled intellectuals, who at the time were preparing a plot against the government. He also, however, offers information that leads one to suspect that Ossorio received money from Rosas, to whom he also provides intelligence. This situation does not allow the researcher to establish if Ossorio is indeed a double agent: “The exiles are fearful; they think he is a double agent. Isolated and disillusioned with politics, he goes to Brazil, where he settles in Rio Grande do Sul, lives with a black woman slave, and devotes himself to writing poetry and contracting syphilis” (Piglia, 1994, p. 26).

Taking this into account, Maggi asks the following:

Doesn’t Ossorio exhibit in a dramatic way a tendency latent in the entire history of the Argentine intelligentsia, increasingly autonomous in the Rosas period? Aren’t his writings the other side of Sarmientos’s? Was he really a traitor? Did he always keep in touch with Rosas? (Piglia, 1994, p. 28)

The reader may appreciate that these are questions that contain hypotheses. They are questions for studying aspects of Argentine culture and politics of the time, in addition to aspects of the biographical life. Certainly the problems that Maggi arrives at range from the ambiguous character of Ossorio's personality (a traitor?) to the very ambivalences with which an autonomous intellectual community arose in Argentina – an intellectual community which he claims, without losing his irony, had founded “principles” and “the reasons for what we call the national culture.”

Despite Maggi's evocative language, which he uses to give a certain effect to his literary account of his biography, it is clear that this is more than simply aesthetic rhetoric. It is true that sometimes the way he describes his research leads us to think that he is hunting for the fundamental element that defines the life of his biographical subject. That is because we are faced with a fictional character wrapped in a fictional plot, or at least in a novel that seeks to give an enigmatic and mysterious effect to its characters. Nevertheless, the investigative methods used by Maggi allow us to appreciate the kind of detective that uses hermeneutical analysis to solve a series of problems that repeatedly arise. Thus, one could differentiate how Maggi describes his research versus the way he carries it out.

That attitude of a hermeneutic detective is latent in almost all parts of *Artificial Respiration* – one could even say this applies to all of Piglia's novels and essays – and not just reflected in Maggi's inquiries. Just like literary critics, Piglia's characters are always conducting hermeneutic analyses. Or to turn it around: Piglia is always doing hermeneutical analysis through his characters, particularly through Emilio Renzi, his alter ego, who tends to appear again and again in his works as that young man who investigates. Moreover, in several interviews Piglia reveals the debt that his work has to his initial training as a historian. He highlights the fact that he was educated by professor-researchers who spent almost all of their time in the archives: “I think the most interesting thing for me was the experience of working in the archives,” he repeats on countless occasions. To which, he adds, perhaps a little romantically: “Historians are the most extraordinary type of reader one can imagine. They spend days and days reading blind documents until they find a light that flickers in the darkness. And with that flash, they begin to illuminate an era.”<sup>6</sup> The attitude with which his characters read documents, both written and oral, could hardly be better described.

The above is presented in order to show an example of hermeneutical analysis performed by one of the characters in *Artificial Respiration*. In the novel, Marcelo Maggi dies leaving his nephew with the task of completing the biography of Ossorio. Thus, like his uncle, Renzi asks and interprets, always following fragmented texts: “What is certain is that I gradually reconstructed the fragments of the life of Enrique Ossorio” (Piglia, 1994, p. 25). But for Renzi the hermeneutical inquiries go still deeper. Their ways of constantly advancing make us see the multiple interventions that impact the sources that we have for our research. His investigations show that even the sources with which the researcher works with are not only mediated by those who produced them but also by others who interpret them. In this regard, let us look at a short example: “That, but expressed in a much more beautiful and enigmatic way, was what the woman told him, Marconi said, Tardewski tells me” (Piglia, 1994, p. 161). This is reminiscent of Chinese whispers or the telephone game, in which one player after another sequentially whispers a message to a final player, who rarely receives the same information transmitted by the first player. This results in several versions of the initial report, recounted by diverse voices, much in the form of a theme and variations in a musical piece.

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<sup>6</sup> See: <http://luchadores.wordpress.com/2006/11/21/entrevista-a-ricardo-piglia-2/>

In an interview that Renzi has with Senator Luciano Ossorio, the grandson of Enrique Ossorio, the senator honors his grandfather's name by conducting a hermeneutical analysis of an "event" in the life of his father with admirable lucidity. This example of interpreting an event is interesting because it also plays with the idea that Piglia has about the interventions that impact the sources. As we shall see in this case, it is an oral source from an interviewee, who not only provides information about an event but also interprets it; that is, he performs a hermeneutic reading of what that event could mean. In this sense, Piglia, through Renzi's narration, suggests that what the researcher actually does is an interpretation about the interpretation that others have previously done of the same event. This is what Renzi tells us the senator *said*:

...notice that my father died in that duel in 1879 and that it was the first case of a crime of honor brought before a jury in a public court. The trial in which he who killed my father in a duel was brought to judgment was an *event*. An "event," said the Senator. But what was, he said, an event, what, he said, in that case, was *the* event? "Not the duel," but the event of that trial. An event like that was not, generally speaking, preserved by historians and yet, he said, those who want to know the meaning of our modern world, those who desire to know what was opening up in this country about 1880, to be precise, need to be able to decipher in that event the first sign of change, of transformation. That was more or less what the Senator said about the duel that had taken his father to the grave. "For the first time, in a trial held to judge the duelist who had killed my father, in the case of that coward in the pay of the Varelas, justice became something in and of itself, independent of a literary and moral mythology of honor that had served as a norm and truth. For the first time the norm of passion and that of honor do not coincide," said the Senator, "and an ethic of true passion emerges. Because in truth those men, those gentlemen, those Masters had learned that it was when they were facing others, when they were *with* those others facing them, that they had to prove who was the Slave. They had discovered," said the Senator, "that they had another means of proving their manliness and chivalry, that they could go on living in the face of death without the need to kill one another; instead, they could *unite* among themselves to kill those who were not disposed to recognize them as their Lords and Masters. As in the cases," he said, "of immigrants, gauchos and Indians. So that," the Senator concluded, "the death of my father in a duel and the subsequent trial is an *event* that in a sense is linked, or rather, I would say," said the Senator, "that accompanies and helps explain the condition and changes that brought to power General Julio Argentino Roca. (Piglia, 1994, pp. 50–51).

This quotation provides a good example of what may be a heuristic and hermeneutical analysis applied to biographical studies. It shows that it is indeed possible to understand the specific and general meanings that can be interpreted for a particular event in the life of a singular individual. As we read, the Senator not only establishes the truthfulness of a real fact – the trial for the man who killed his father – but also the meanings he has to understand the historical movement of the society in general: the establishment of the modern state in Argentina. Based on Marx's ideas, Sartre (1963) proposes the progressive-regressive and analytic-synthetic method: "he gives to each event, in addition to its particular signification, the role of being revealing. Since the ruling principle of the inquiry is the search for the synthetic ensemble, each fact, once established, is questioned and interpreted as part of a whole" (p. 26). And certainly, in this case, the Senator is applying that procedure precisely. Let us see how it succeeds in detail.

The Senator starts from a hypothesis that tries to decipher the meanings that a particular human action has: the trial of his father's murderer. The hypothesis: after the independence of Spain in the early nineteenth century, Argentina experienced various confrontations between the different elites that made up the country. However, toward the end of the same century, these elites succeeded in agreeing to lay the foundations of a modern state that protected their interests and kept the lower classes – natives, gauchos, immigrants, workers – at bay. That oligarchic pact would make the government of General Julio Argentino Roca possible. He would come to power a year after the assassination of the Senator's father, and under his term, the first jury trial and public session for a crime of that type took place. Thus the trial in question revealed the structural importance of the secularization of the judiciary promoted by the government elite, which managed to reserve for itself control over the mechanisms of power.

As will be recalled, under the government of General Julio Argentino Roca, Argentina managed to establish a national army (as is found in most modern nation-states), and to integrate itself into the world market as a supplier of raw materials and purchaser of manufactured products, all under the motto of "Peace and Administration." The head of this process was General Roca, who managed to secure an agreement among the elites around his government. Thus, Argentina experienced a period of stability that would advance the modernization of the State and the consolidation of a nascent national bourgeoisie. For this reason, General Roca is considered the great architect of Argentine national history.

Nevertheless, as the Senator sees his interpretation of the facts, it is a process that is built on a history of blood and repression that is not generally recognized. It is the genocidal history of thousands of natives of Patagonia and Chaco, carried out by General Roca in his infamous conquest of the desert, which would serve to expand the frontier for agricultural exporters. It is also the exclusion of the gauchos and the repression of immigrants and workers, which would be useful to the interests of the new capitalist elite. In short, it is a process in which the elites, increasingly frightened by the pressure exerted by sectors of the popular classes, close ranks to protect their interests. Thus, in his hermeneutical analysis of the trial of his father's murderer, the Senator concludes: "...the death of my father in a duel and the subsequent trial is an *event* that in a sense is linked, or rather, I would say, the Senator said, that accompanies and helps explain the conditions and changes that brought to power General Julio Argentino Roca" (Piglia, 1994, pp. 50–51): the architect of the modern Argentine state.

## Conclusion

During the last century and a half, the discipline of History fought to conquer a respectable place in the social sciences. And to the extent that it succeeded, biography, as a genre suspended between fiction and fact, had to be banished so that History, which had to be written with a capital H, could achieve a long-sought-after scientific respectability. Given its unclassifiable and impure character, its proximity to the literary, the intuitive, the emotional or any kind of subjectivism, biography wound up confined to the attic of old memorabilia, along with the trumpets and drums of the old history of great heroes, confined to where no one would embarrass anyone else.

Being a biographer was something like being a frustrated novelist or, as it were, a small-time historian. "Those are things for less serious people", professional historians would say mockingly here and there. However, the temptation to pursue a biographical subject persisted. As if it were an irresistible sin, historians have never failed to be seduced by the act of

biography. These are the polemics that have been awakened in this genre, which despite the contempt it endured during the last century is back today with a vitality that places its practice at the center of the most innovative historiographic currents.

At present, biography is seen as a field of research with enormous possibilities for experimentation, which by its subjective nature and in search of the real, tends to break with both the old models of mechanistic structuralism and fashionable postmodernism centered on narrative aesthetics. Biography, as we understand it here, continues to focus on the establishment of concrete facts, the understanding of flesh and blood human beings and their subjective mediations—all without losing sight of the structural constraints, the use of theoretical models and, ultimately, the rigorous analysis of society and subjects.

Biography is a complicated endeavor that leads researchers down narrow paths full of traps and illusions, which they must know how to deal with in order not to get lost in teleological and literary fictions. But, regardless of whether it is Marxist, psychoanalytic, Weberian, Bourdieusian, or any other explanatory approach used by the biographer, one of the most fruitful alternatives presented to them today is the use of heuristic and hermeneutical strategies. The possibility offered by these strategies for the real establishment of facts and subjects, including their many particular and structural meanings, gives biography an experimental potential to discuss theories and concepts, as well as the understanding of the individual and society. To repeat: by its very hybrid nature, which is both factual and fictitious, biography has been rediscovered today as a privileged space for the experimentation of social sciences. Thus, at the same time, it challenges the currents that defend scientific approaches, which involve monocausal and deterministic explanations, and those that are entangled in outlandish postmodern and aesthetic discourses of extreme relativism. Biography stands as a genre concerned with historical veracity that is sensitive to the use of the imagination as a means to access reality. There is no last word with biography, but rather a whole world with which to experiment.

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