

Biography Under Scrutiny.

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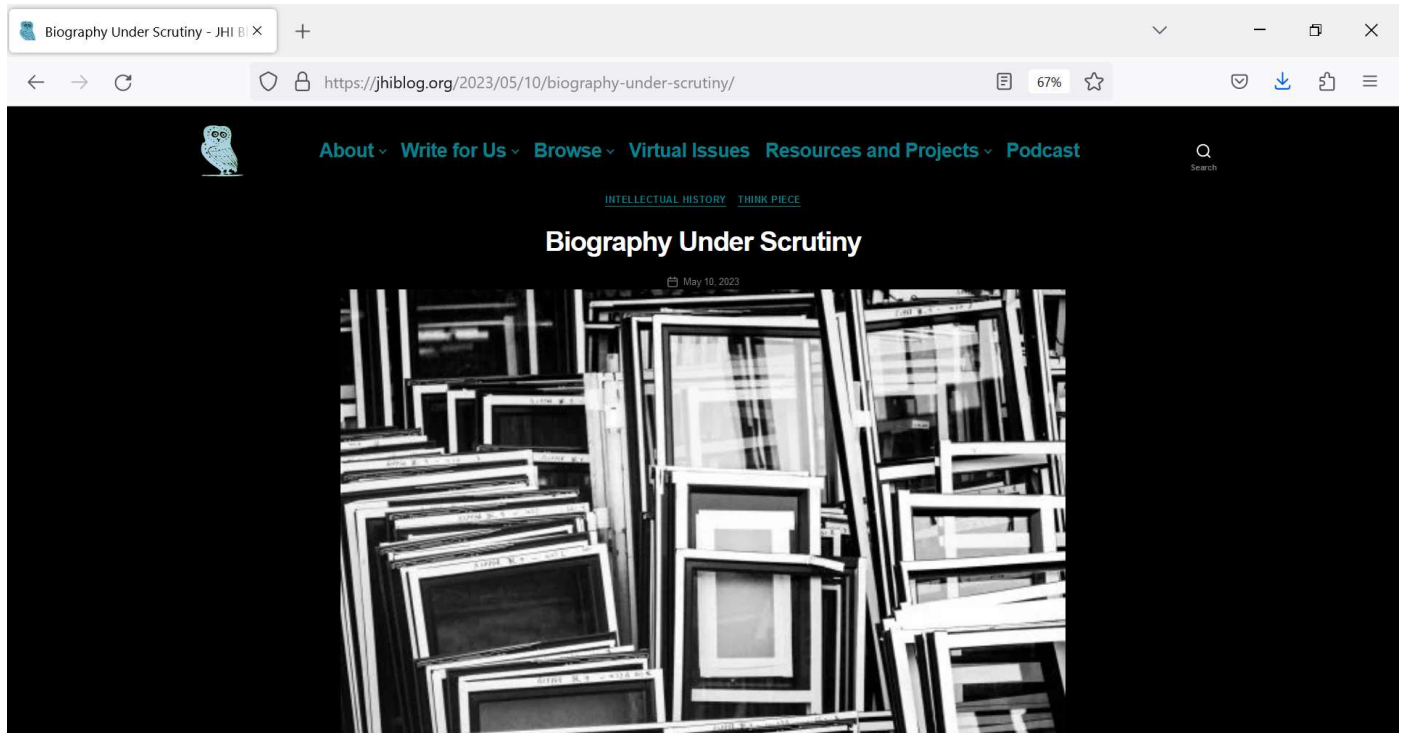
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By Paula Bruno

The last two decades have seen the publication of works that, when read together, make it possible to map the state of the art of what I choose to call “biographical studies”. Most of these works were published in European countries: Spain, France, England, and Italy. Thus, today we can, to contemplate a bibliographic corpus comprising the works of [François Dose](#), [Hermione Lee](#), [Sabina Loriga](#), [Isabel Burdiel](#) and [Roy Foster](#) (free to download), and complement these contributions in volume format with a selection of dossiers from academic journals published in recent years. Furthermore, it is also quite common to read that the genre of biography has been renewed in different academic circles, an observation borne out by rising output rates and the recurrence of optimistic comments on the subject.

Most of the diagnoses of biography available today, as well as the space taken up by the genre within the different spheres of knowledge production, spring from a specific historical moment: 1989. The explanation? Is a familiar one: [the crisis of great explanatory paradigms](#) opened up a field that was at once chaotic and fertile, offering an opportunity to revisit political, social, cultural and historical issues. As is already known, the idea of crisis per se prompted readings colored by both pessimistic and optimistic hues at the same time. From another point of view, this seemed to be a historical moment with the possibility of a new foundation. In such a context, biography offered a way of escape or renewal.

Many of biographies' writers have an active experience of this historiographical scenario. In fact, practically all of them have developed their careers in university lecture rooms and social spaces where the great explanatory paradigms of the 20th century (mainly, marxism, social history and structuralism) were never questioned. And yet, as the century advanced, in parallel with its scholarly output, the idea of crisis, chaos, and confusion became commonplace. These biographical marks may well appear in several of the published texts outlining post-1989 diagnoses, and, in turn, they share many optimistic assertions. It is as if the genre of biography had operated, in some cases, as an antidote to chaos and confusion. In fact, the idea of renewal and a fresh direction associated with the biographical genre seems to be a formula enabling various authors writing about biography to conjure up the ghost of the historiographical crisis. Whereas there was an attempt to recover the individual and the subjective in passing from the macro to the micro, and the historian tried to give room to faces and voices that had faded into the context of all-encompassing umbrella labels; that is to say, whereas the writer made an effort to "humanize" the Social Sciences and the Humanities, biography as a formula presented as an effective way of restoring the human visage buried by the study of collective actors. In this way, the individual or collective biography offers something akin to a redemptive logic in the passage from macrosocial history to the valuation of the micro, the individual and the subjective, in its different expressions. Thus, the expansion of biographical forms began to convey a certain confidence in the attempt to respond to a paradigmatic crisis.

Combining the arguments expressed above enables us to observe that biography as a form was considered a response to two issues. Firstly, it provided an answer to the crisis of historiographical and academic production, and secondly, it was a way of releasing academics from scientism and the parochial world of their peers. It gave them an opportunity to cross the bridge and ensure that this historical discipline, like some irreducible mandate, would definitively reach the market of readers, one that had expanded due to its interest in the past. The discipline seemed capable of responding to certain demands made by society as a consumer of historical knowledge, by offering biographical accounts, a trait that generally tends to be naturalized, as if it were obvious that there exists a common sense of widespread historical curiosity. In some diagnoses, therefore, the link between the market and academic output is key to considering the role of biography in recent decades. There seems to be an overriding optimism regarding the sentence uttered in 1989 by [Marc Ferro](#): biography has never been a taboo subject for the general public, although it has been for professional historians.

Some of the contributions published since the late 1980s to the present have stressed the need to denature the concept of biography, and not consider it from an innocent point of view. In 1989, Giovanni Levi warned about the multiple ways in which it could occur, and only a short while later, [Sabina Loriga](#) drew attention to the concept of the biographical form as a problem. A few years ago, I attempted to deepen this analysis in the Hispanic-American sphere with the coordination and publication of a dossier in a specialized journal, entitled *Biografía e historia. Reflexiones y perspectivas* ([Biography and history. Reflections and perspectives](#)). In the introduction, I pointed out the need to establish whether, when referring to the concept of biography, one was making reference to a genre, a method, or a resource—or to some combination of these possibilities. I consider that making this differentiation is central, essentially, to thinking about the relationship between biography and history.

In some of the panoramic texts referred to above, the distinctions between biography as a genre, method, and resource overlap or are otherwise indistinguishable. Although perhaps it is somewhat schematic to state this, I think that the distinction can serve to drive a reflection on the subject. If we take biography as a genre—the biographical genre—we can group together in particular those writings that take biography as a narrative form. Starting from this main/central consideration, one can consider both the market of the broad audiences interested in reading about the past, and the relationships between different biographic

and literary forms. I believe that the question of biography as a genre prompts debate about narrative forms and about the relationship—not necessarily always friendly in nature—between reality and fiction. In fact, in much of the output examining biographical studies, appeals are made to historians who turn their hand to the biographical genre, enjoining them to read more novels in order to gain additional sensibility, improve their style, enhance their attention to plot, characters, and suspense, among many other tips concerned with writing a good biography. These issues lead to the already classical debate on the relationships between content and form, and accentuate the importance of the second aspect of this formula when thinking about the effectiveness of the narration of a person's life.

On the other hand, if we think on biography as a method, it is possible to articulate considerations about biographical issues with debates linked to the possibilities of knowledge. At this point, I think the question that arises is deceptively simple: What, and to what extent, can be known through the study/narration of a person's life? Telling the story of a life tells us about certain issues lying in the past; in this sense, biography is a tool of knowledge and understanding, and of course we should contemplate its scope and limits.

As a third modulation, and perhaps the most widespread, biography appears as a resource or an “excuse”. That is, profiles, character sketches or careers are used as a way of explaining historical processes or more general issues, rather than as an end in themselves. In several texts, there is an abundance of metaphors referring to biography as a “window” shedding light on an era, as a “viewpoint” from which to approach a given process, as a “magnifying glass” able to home in on certain aspects of the context, for instance. In fact, biographical portraits very often illustrate some aspect already taken as valid, in order to support regularities or generalizations—or, at the other extreme, to highlight exceptional cases and possibilities arising on the sidelines.

In short, although the three options—genre, method and resource—can coexist harmoniously in research experiences, I believe that any debates on these would be quite prolific. In other words, there is a kind of false consensus that biography is such-and-such-a-thing, or that it serves one purpose rather than another, essentially resting on gray definitions. At this point, it is convenient to draw attention to a clue lying in the name of the academic network handling these issues in Europe, whose members are the authors of works included in the Burdiel and Foster compilation; it is the “[European Network of the Theory and Practice of Biography](#)”. The compilation assembled by [Burdiel and Foster](#), including contributions by the members of this network, explicitly takes a stand on these points of view by inverting the notion of “historical biography” and referring instead, to a “biographical history”. This approach attempts to resolve some of the more prominent methodological and narrative issues by referring to “biographical” as an adjective rather than “biography” as a noun. That is to say, the “biographical history”—a term coined by Sabina Loriga—would become yet another historical area, viz. political, cultural, social, intellectual, or biographical. In a complementary direction, authors such as [Bernard Pudal](#) have called attention to the use of the words biography as a noun and biographical as an adjective when working in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The notions generally attributed to the biographical genre, and to the biographer as an author, suggest a tension intrinsic to the analysis of the relationship between the marginal and the central within academic fields. It is quite common to find references to the genre of biography as the bearer of the attractions of “all things rare and unusual”, meaning unique and particular. This idea gives rise to considerations about biographers as if they were the only ones capable of attaining certain privileges when dealing with the past. The metaphors used tend to be recurrent: it is often pointed out that biographers are passionate, they deploy investigative, even detective-type operations, they are capable of donning the garb of mediums able to tune into a deep understanding of the intentions and emotions of those who are the subject of the biography. Sometimes, it is even suggested that biographies produce an intimate experience, at once unique, exciting, and full of rewarding surprises. Some of these aspects are emphasized and deepened, particularly when issues related to some form of “identification” enter the scene; for example, sharing a gender, the same profession, or a special form of aesthetic sensibility. There is also the idea that writing about other people's lives arouses certain sensations and feelings, creating a vicarious sense of living certain experiences, and deciphering the intricate depths of the human soul. Accordingly, the act of composing a biography is punctuated by expressions linked to adventure, challenge, kinship and passion.

In short, some considerations would suggest that the epistemological or cognitive experience prompted by biographical research is in fact a unique privilege. In tension with this view is the emphasis on the marginal importance afforded to the biographer in the academic world, sometimes expressed in the selfsame texts. I believe that this tension between attribute and stigma is sometimes indicative of the failure to take a stand concerning the claim that the study of a life—or a group of lives—can be a form of understanding or accessing the past. That is to say, perhaps, that by insisting on the particular and intimate bond established between the biographer and their subject, one omits the explicit mention of which kinds of questions lead to a certain form of biographical investigation.

In short, there is a tension between marginality and privilege, conditions inherent to a long history of biography as a genre, amply sustained by both its admirers and detractors, and reconstructed in exemplary fashion by [Sabina Loriga](#). This means that in some way, those interested in biographical studies end up trapped in debates designed for the few, instead of decisively intervening in more general issues linked to the production of knowledge. As [Arnaldo Momigliano pointed out decades ago](#): “biography has acquired an ambiguous role in historical research: it can either be an instrument of social research, or it can be an escape from social research.” These words shine a light on what is possibly the main challenge facing the biographer: deciding whether biography is enough in itself as a way of understanding past events and developments, or assuming that biography must be problematic to provide an insight into the past.

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She is founder and current Academic Director of the Network for Biographical Studies of Latin America (REBAL). Also, she has founded the first Public History Laboratory in the Southern Cone.

She has published *Paul Groussac. Un estratega intelectual* (2005), *Travesías intelectuales de Paul Groussac* (2004), *Pioneros culturales de la Argentina. Biografías de una época, 1860-1910*, (2011), *Martin García Mérou. Vida intelectual y diplomática en las Américas* (2018), *Embajadoras culturales. Mujeres latinoamericanas y vida diplomática, 1860-1960* (with Alexandra Pita y Marina Alvarado, 2021), among other books, and many academic articles.

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