

Beyond Biography

Semantics of (Self-)Construction

Levke Harders and Axel C. Huentelmann

Imagine visiting a bookstore in your hometown. At chains like *Barnes & Nobles* in the United States, *Fnac* in France or *Thalia* in Germany one finds well-filled shelves with biographies and autobiographies, regularly supplemented with new publications. On the occasion of anniversaries of birthdays or days of death, like Albert Einstein's in 2005 or Charles Darwin's in 2009, a huge number of new biographies is published. Today ›biography‹ is a diversified genre, especially in regard to academic publications. In contrast to the stuffed shelves and their popularity, biography as a method in the humanities has had a rather negative reputation. Its low status is astonishing because no other genre is as present as biography in diverse fields like history, sociology, cultural studies, literature or the arts – to name only a few. Even though biographies are genuinely appreciated by the general readership and though they are prevalent in several academic disciplines, scholars do rarely discuss the methods or the theory of biographical writing. Biographies are, as the British literary scholar David Ellis sharply remarks, »lives without theory« (Ellis 2000:1).

But there is light (respectively: theory) at the end of the tunnel. Since the 1990s, only few approaches in the humanities have developed as dynamic as the genre of biography. The individual in its times and its societal context moves more and more back to the centre. In the field of literature, both scholars and writers discuss the ›return of the author‹. Sociological analysis focuses on life and career patterns, while historical studies deal with biographical topics like illness, migration, or individual experiences with bereavement or trauma. Biographies written in an academic context have become more and more critical, questioning and reflecting on the biographical subject. Biographers do not only contemplate on the

construction of a unitary, autonomous subject, but also on categories like race, class and gender as well as their own perspective on the person they are writing about. In the opinion of some critics, (post-)modern biography at the same time functions as part of the biographer's autobiography (Fish 1999).

Biography has always been an interdisciplinary genre – with all its benefits and difficulties. Therefore, theoretical questions as well as methods of biographical writing have to be discussed on an interdisciplinary level. During the last decade, a renewed dialogue has been institutionalised in the German-speaking countries at the *Centre for Biographics (Zentrum für Biographik)*, the Austrian *Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography (Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Geschichte und Theorie der Biographie)*, the *Institute for History and Biography* at the *University of Hagen* and, since the late 1980s, in *BIOS, a Journal for biographical research, oral history and life course research (BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebenslaufanalysen)*.¹ The current interest in (and the need for) theoretical discussions on biography becomes apparent by the publication of overviews of the history and practice of the genre (Hamilton 2007; 2008; Lee 2009) and by two compendia on the history and theory of biography from the past few years.²

»Beyond Biography«, the here presented issue of *InterDisciplines*, originates from a workshop on the »Semantics of (Self)Construction. (Auto-)Biography in Sociology and History in the 19th and 20th centuries«, held in Bielefeld (Germany) in January 2010. The participants in the conference discussed their projects on biography and life course research in history and sociology. We reflected upon common problems, methods and theoretical approaches as well as on different perspectives in the two

1 For more information about the *Centre for Biographics*: www.zentrum-fuer-biographik.de/en/index.htm; about the *Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the History and Theory of Biography*: <http://gtb.lbg.ac.at/en/>; about the *Institute for History and Biography* as well as about *BIOS*: www.fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie.

2 Fetz 2009; Klein 2009. For sociological approaches see: Fuchs-Heinritz 1984/2009.

disciplines and their reciprocal influences. Although the biography genre has developed as a distinct field of research during the past few years, communication on and comprehension of common theoretical and methodological foundations in sociology and history are mostly missing.³

The discussion during the workshop touched mainly issues of current debates on biography. To begin with, the term »biography« itself was questioned: What kind of literary genre is biography? What type of source material characterises biographies? How do the new media influence biographies, e.g. is a personal profile on *Facebook* or other social networks valuable as a biographical source? How should a biographer assess different personal papers (diaries, notes, letters) for the professional career of his or her biographical subject? The »Biographical Questionnaire« on the cover of this issue was filled in by the teacher and scholar Elizabeth Reynard (1897-1962).⁴ As an alumna of Barnard College, Reynard was one of the early founders of American Studies as well as a lieutenant commander of the *United States Naval Reserve* during the Second World War. She answered the »Biographical Questionnaire« in the 1950s after her retirement. Though the document gives only sparse information about her education and career, it can serve as a first means of access to biographical research on a female scholar in the 20th century (Harders 2009). Though these »Bioseme«, as Myriam Richter calls the smallest biographical entities, seem to function as objective and neutral personal data, biographers have to keep in mind that even these tads and

3 The workshop was organized by Levke Harders, Julia Herzberg, Axel C. Huentelmann and Dominique Schröder. We would like to thank Julia Herzberg and Dominique Schröder for this fruitful cooperation. Cf. the conference report by Carsten Heinze and Christian Meyer: »Semantiken der (Selbst-)Konstruktion. (Auto-)Biographisches Arbeiten in Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert«. 21.1.2010-23.1.2010, Bielefeld. H-Soz-u-Kult, 11.5.2010, <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3096>.

4 Associate Alumnae of Barnard College, Biographical Questionnaire, Elizabeth Reynard, Class of 1922. Barnard College Archives, Barnard College, New York, NY. We would like to thank the Barnard College Archives for the permission to print this document.

bits of biographical information include judgment and contain – or better they do not contain – omissions.

Secondly, the term »biography« is commonly linked to autobiography or biography in the traditional sense of a life story. Recent studies – and also this issue of *InterDisciplines* – go beyond this popular understanding of biography. »Beyond Biography« includes different types of writing about an individual: While the genre of autobiography might consist of diaries, interviews or other evidence, the genre of biography might deal with certain periods of a life, with biographical narration on a meta-level (e.g. Rupke 2008) or with a specific group of persons in a collective biography (see below).

Thirdly, some speakers dealt with the precarious relation between autobiography and biography. Although autobiographies appear to be more authentic, memoirs develop a specific narrative, since the author is tempted to harmonise his or her own life course. Moreover, participants challenged the intention for and the generators of (auto-)biographical writing like confessions or interviews.⁵ The differentiation between the categories of autobiography and biography led to other problems, too. The biographical subject becomes part of the author's life. She or he not only has to critically analyse the sources of his/her research subject or those concerning it but also to question her or his own motives as well as her or his relation to the biographical subject.

All these topics reach beyond biography, but have to be dealt with in current biographical studies. The articles in this number of *InterDisciplines* touch on interrelated subject matters: Are there identifiable semantics of biographical writing? How can we productively analyse the tension between memory, reality, construction and narration? What kinds of problems occur with the reconstruction respectively the construction of a life course? How does the author's identity relate to his or her writing of someone else's life story? What are the methodological advantages and

5 Alois Hahn conceptualises the so-called »Biographiegeneratoren«, cf. the essay »Biographie und Lebenslauf« in Hahn 2000: 87-115; see also Bohn & Willems 2001; and Rosenthal 2010.

pitfalls of individual biography and of collective biography, i.e. the well-known tension between the micro- and the macro-level?

The (self-)construction of a biography always involves a tension between subjective reality and memory, narration and legend-building. On the one hand, the semantics of biography encompass literary or audiovisual descriptions of a person's life, using well-known formulas and legends. On the other hand, these formulas and legends influence the writing of a biography, since they develop a life of their own. In reference to Hayden White, the »narrative relativity« of historiographical work could also shed light upon biographical work: As with all stories, the biographer finds his or her sources as single episodes and then interconnects them by drafting a chronological order to build a complete and logical story. This narration usually begins with the birth of the protagonist (or the story of his or her ancestors) and ends with his or her death. In this process, the chronological events are composed to form a reasonable structure that, taking place in a certain context, becomes a story by attaining a meaningful organisation. In accordance to White, the sense of a story can only be appreciated through this construction and the explanation of events, whereas for the genre of biography the sense of the story is generated through explication, conclusion, ideological implications, but especially through emplotment: For the reader, the storyline becomes reasonable through an archetypical plot underlying the narration (White 1986). Consequently, the analysis of (auto-)biographies has to identify the basic design and its considerable influence on the narration of the life course. The biographical narrative is guided by sources which rely on chronological incidents, so that the story always includes the claim to be »objective« and historically »true«. Nevertheless, by adapting factual events to the narrative pattern the biographical text constantly develops additional meaning.

An analysis of the narrative structures and semantics of biographies has to take into account »biographical formulas«, i.e. typical metaphors and topoi which are steadily repeated in different biographies, with only slight alterations (Kris & Kurz 1934/1995: 29). A biography can be built upon the basis of other biographies and their emplotments. These bio-

graphical blueprints develop a life on their own insofar that the following generation might stage their own lives (or their life stories) consistent with these topoi. They vary in regard to the subject's profession or social background: While in many biographies of physicians the encounter with a hurt creature is mentioned as a crucial motive for the later choice of the medical profession (Gradmann 2003; Klein 2006), biographies of artists often identify the motive of an »innate« passion. Either way, biographical topoi refer both to the ideal and ethic potential of the chosen profession and to the alleged natural »genius« of the person.

In this issue, Axel Hüntelmann sketches the early attempts of Paul Ehrlich's family, who started to commission a biography after his death. By these early efforts to produce a biography of »Ehrlich the Nobelprize winner«, Huentelmann illustrates the inherent modes which then created legends. Similar to other scientists – like Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur – the early biographies on Ehrlich portrayed a genius searching for the scientific truth in his laboratory rather than a realistic picture of his life and career. In his article Huentelmann demonstrates the process of myth-construction by means of the alleged chemical talent of Ehrlich. His early chemical experiments during his years of studying were gradually moved to his school days and associated with the scientific interest of his grandfather. Thus, through this genealogical link, Ehrlich's career and his success appeared as the inevitable endpoint of a natural predisposition.

Another important topic of biography concerns the semantics of (self-)definition. Studies in literature and sociology have shown the significance of narration for the construction of a life course, both in biography and autobiography. Malte Griesse presents a detailed analysis of the relation between (life-)writing, memory and selfconstruction. He reconsiders the significance of atomization in Stalinist society and reassesses the phenomenon of imposture as a constituent part of the system's functioning. In historiography impostors have been regarded as subverters who perfectly mastered Bolshevik language and behavioural codes to take advantage of the revolutionary chaos and the system's dysfunctions: Thus, they revealed the regime's incapacity to establish totalitarian control. This

view overlooks that parallel to its campaigns for transparency and unambiguity the Stalinist regime systematically pushed large segments of the population into double-dealing, i.e. into hiding central aspects of their (past) lives. The impact of such dissimulation is explored on the basis of an inedited personal diary written by a former Menshevik converted to Bolshevism who concealed his former political allegiance and committed to paper his sufferings from loneliness and political guilt. For him his diary was a means to »leave a trace« and »find consolation« in »conversations with himself«. It is a liminal document that perfectly illustrates Arendt's distinction between solitude as domain of dialogical thinking and loneliness as a state of readiness to succumb to purely deductive logical (or totalitarian) thinking, a distinction that is developed with the aid of the multiple-personality-model as proposed in ego-states-psychology.

The next two contributions reflect on the question of identity and images of a person in life writing. Theo Jung deals with the writing self and the author's identity. He introduces his paper with Rousseau's 1749 inspirational experience on the road to Vincennes when he was on his way to visit Diderot in prison, which became a crucial moment in his life story. In his many autobiographical writings he would time and again interpret this event as the seminal point of his identity as a writer. Taking the conflicting contemporary interpretations of the Vincennes episode as a starting point, this article asks in what way modern, post-subjectivist theories of the self can enrich our understanding of historical events, while at the same time providing answers to wider questions concerning the ways in which historically changing and contextually specific forms of what it means to be a self are constructed, interpreted, articulated and »put into practice«. To this end, Rousseau's »illumination« and its subsequent interpretations are interpreted in the light of contemporary controversies over the identity of the writer that developed against the background of fundamental changes in the social and economic structure of the literary field.

Dominique Schröder examines the phenomenon of diary writing at German concentration and transit camps. She focuses on the question of how Jewish and so called political prisoners used language to express

their experiences and to cope with their daily surroundings in the camps. Taking the diaries of Hanna Lévy-Hass and Emile Delaunois as examples, the article first describes the writing environment of these two diarists: Bergen-Belsen on the one hand and Ellrich, a sub-camp of Dora-Mittelbau, on the other. Schröder then discusses the role of diary writing regarding the construction of the writer's self, highlighting the specific characteristics of diary writing in an extreme situation like the concentration camp. This part is followed by a description of the biographical backgrounds of Emile Delaunois and Hanna Lévy-Hass and of the material appearance of their texts. This leads to a deeper analysis of the two diaries concerning what is called the political self. It is shown how this concept was designed, constructed and preserved through language within the medium of the diary.

While Schröder uses the method of comparing two (auto-)biographies, collective biography focuses on a larger group of persons. While prosopographical approaches analyse large quantities of data (e.g. in the history of politics or of science), collective biography enables research on the influence of social structures and values on individual lives and careers. At the same time, collective biography as a method deals with personal choices and agency. As a result, collective biographies explain both the representative patterns and the specific qualities of the sample, like a group of scientists, of writers or of a family. Besides, studies in collective biography might shed light on intersectional questions, since their comparative perspective allows for researching the construction of gender, class, race, age, disability and other relations of power (Harders & Schweiger 2009).

As a means of creating a sample for a collective biography, »generation« is a key concept in history and sociology. By the example of former COMECON pipeline builders from the GDR, Jeanette Prochnow examines the impact of generational belonging on community and network building under the conditions of social change in post-1989 Germany. Since the 1990s a vivid culture of companionship and remembrance has developed among former pipeline workers. It is kept alive by associations and interest groups claiming to represent the interests of people

who were employed with the state-run pipeline project either in 1974-1978 or 1982-1993. Yet, employees of the first construction phase remain noticeably underrepresented in the community. In an attempt to explore this generational segregation, concepts of the Ethnography of Communication are combined with a network analytical perspective and Karl Mannheim's sociology of generation. The paper is guided by the hypothesis that the »speech community« of former pipeline builders corresponds to a »generational unit« to which employees from the 1970s do not belong because of varying performances responding to events in the socio-historical context.

With these considerations, »Beyond Biography« would like to contribute to the discussion on interdisciplinary methods and theories of (auto-) biography.

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