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Nick Salvatore
Cornell University, nas4@cornell.edu

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Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship

Abstract
Biography has been considered as outside the discipline of history by many historians. Since the chronological framework of the study is pre-deter-mined, given the subject's life, it has been argued, it does not meet the fundamental historical test of analyzing historical change across time. Others, particularly literary critics, have suggested that the biographical emphasis on the personal is itself, at root, invalid. This comment instead suggests that the recent turn to biography in labor and social history is most welcome, for it creates the possibility of a broader understanding of the interplay between an individual and social forces beyond one's ability to control. But to write a social biography demands a disciplinary rigor and thorough research effort that treats equally seriously both the subject and the context that shapes that life.

Keywords
biography, social history, labor history, social change

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Biography and Social History : an Intimate Relationship

Nick Salvatore*

Biography has been considered as outside the discipline of history by many historians. Since the chronological framework of the study is pre-determined, given the subject's life, it has been argued, it does not meet the fundamental historical test of analyzing historical change across time. Others, particularly literary critics, have suggested that the biographical emphasis on the personal is itself, at root, invalid. This comment instead suggests that the recent turn to biography in labor and social history is most welcome, for it creates the possibility of a broader understanding of the interplay between an individual and social forces beyond one's ability to control. But to write a social biography demands a disciplinary rigor and thorough research effort that treats equally seriously both the subject and the context that shapes that life.

In the fall of 1973, in the midst of a prolonged research trip through the American Midwest, I had a strange discussion with a reference librarian and historian at a major archive. Then working on my doctoral dissertation, I knew the library held certain collections of interest and asked if there were others I might have missed. In response to his request, I began to discuss in greater detail my project, a biography of the American labor leader and socialist, Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926). Abruptly he interrupted me with the authoritative declaration: 'You can't write a biography for your dissertation'. Surprised, I asked why. To which he said, in effect: a dissertation is your 'union card' into the historical profession, and biography is not history because the question of periodisation is a given, as biography is framed by the birth and death of the subject. I am not certain exactly what he expected me to say, but I did the only thing that made sense to me. I immediately asked him for the folders I needed and discussed with other staff about additional collections of interest.

Although not yet a biographer (I had yet to write even the opening sentence of what would become, following the dissertation, my first biography[1]), I had already survived the first onslaught by those in the profession intent on asserting biography's irrelevance to the craft of history. Even before literary theory became commonplace in the academy, a broad swath of the historical profession dismissed the genre as of piddling interest. The complaints varied, as I encountered them across the decade of research and writing the Debs book, but certain themes persisted.

First, of course, was the purported absence of an analytic heart to the biographical project. The birth and death of the subject defined the parameters of the book, this critique held, regardless of sweeping transformations in society and culture that predated (and outlasted) the individual in question. The conceptual task of the historian, that archivist had opined, is to establish the time frame for the movement of major ideas and events, so as to better define both continuities and epochal (or not so epochal) moments that reflect humanity's shifting understandings of the world. Against this expectation, he (and others) held the predictable narrative of a 'life and times' biography sorely wanting. A second and related objection dismissed biography for its delusional emphasis on 'great men' and their deeds. This was not a new critique, nor was it totally misguided. The Victorian legacy is all too real, and the practice of elevating the biographer's subject far above the mundane world he or

she actually inhabited informed far too many efforts. The 1960s and 1970s, moreover, witnessed the resurgence of an interest in social history. As Samuel Hayes defined the field's expectations in 1965, for the social historian: 'the crucial questions concern human institutions and the types of organisation of economic, social, political, and intellectual life that develop and change over time'.[2] Decades of institutional studies of trade unions, left and centrist alike, and their often elite leaders were now scorned, left for history's dustbin. In their place, under the influence of historians such as E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman, David Brody, David Montgomery, and Eric Hobsbawm, a then younger generation – my generation – sought to rewrite the experience of working people and, some hoped, to remake the world in the process. With great millennial fervor, one representative historian explained that the task was to focus 'on issues of exploitation, domination, and oppression ... on ordinary people rather than political elites, on groups rather than individuals, and on human agency rather than on abstract or general processes of change'.[3] It was a heady time, one that explored and, at times, invented, group solidarities among non-elites that inevitably contested capitalism and its cheerleaders. But it was not a moment of unbound enthusiasm for a biographical approach.

Related to the first two was another point that was the most frequent objection I encountered while working on Debs. Whether driven by political ideologies, an evangelical belief in the efficacy of social history, or a potent combination of the two, some critics raised a common complaint in the form of a question. What was the value of a particular life for understanding the broader forces that structure the society and culture every individual inhabits? The objection was less to the selection of a given subject than an assertion that no one individual can serve as a useful vehicle to explore deeper social tendencies. Aligned with this broad query were two other objections. The first insisted on a specific approach to biographical writing. Those who write biography without sustained engagement with psychological analysis, Erik Erikson wrote in *Young Man Luther*, 'all too nobly immerse themselves into the very disguises, rationalisations, and idealisations of the historical process from which it should be their business to separate themselves'. Through a contrasting prism came literary theory to argue that it was impossible for the biographer to separate from the subject, to see that person with any semblance of objectivity. Inevitably, then, the reader's own interpretative presence interacted with the biographer's, and the erstwhile subject receded yet further into the distance. Even more, in a frontal attack on the basic concept of biography, literary critics held that the intrusion of any personal dimension – the biographer's stock-in-trade – introduced an inherently false vision. The work (in this case the novel) stood apart from the author's life, and for the critic to think otherwise was mere bourgeois sentiment.[4]

Not all of these reactions missed the mark. In fact, many forced me to become more self-conscious of my approach to the subject. Yet I knew that the totality of the dismissal some advocated was not merely wrong but, in a serious way, dangerous to a more humanistic vision that would understand the individuality of those whom, to quote Thompson, were to be saved 'from the condescension of history'. I persisted in my efforts with Debs, went onto publish a second biography some years later of Amos Webber, a previously unknown, nineteenth-century African American janitor, church activist, and Civil War veteran; and will publish next year another, this time of C.L. Franklin, a twentieth-century Afro-Baptist minister.[5] From this perch, then, I

will make an effort to contribute to this wonderful effort to examine the individual in labor and social history. However, as the essays in this issue are, by virtue of space limitations, incomplete biographical portraits, and as I have no knowledge of the broader research projects they are drawn from, I will not offer a detailed analysis of them. Rather, I will try to address some of the broader themes raised by these essays concerning the relationship between biography and social history.

In the introduction to *Eugene V. Debs*, I referred to the book as a 'social biography,' one that intended to explore both the individual and the broader social context. I did not think that I had just invented a new genre; rather, I was intrigued by a question applicable to the lives of all human beings. How, in what ways, with what success, does an individual interact with, create a life from, and possibly alter a culture and a society not of their own making, one which they largely inherit? The approach here was not to reinvent the romantic view of the 'great man' rising above society's limitations, which had been rightly criticised; nor was it to frame my work within a specific psychological analysis. I neither felt knowledgeable enough nor comfortable with the idea of subjecting this pre-Freudian Debs to such a systematic reading. But in exploring the interaction between the public and the private in this man's life, I sought to understand the patterns of choices made in each sphere from the possibilities he then envisioned. In this regard, I wrote *Debs* very much in a humanistic tradition and hoped the reader, while better understanding historical forces, may also see in layered depictions of the subject something of themselves as well.

Am I not then, as the literary critics might suggest, simply 'making up' my subject, deluding myself that I can actually encounter another person in this manner? I thought then, and do now, that the impossibility of absolute objectivity is not therefore an invitation to sophistical relativism. Rather, the traditional imperatives of the historian's craft themselves provide guidelines to exploring this play between the individual and the social world he or she inhabits.

The basis for this approach to biography is rooted in ideas and events larger than the individual subject. In *Debs*, for example, the larger issue concerned how non-elite Americans experienced the transition to industrial capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Encountering Amos Webber, in *We All Got History*, opened up the tantalising prospect of exploring something of the private and public life of an unknown American. My biography of Franklin, *Singing in a Strange Land*, in turn, has at its core a desire to know more about the intersection of racial identity, religious belief, and social and political activism in black America over the last century. Beneath these issues lay two other concerns: an abiding interest to examine the tension between the promise of American democracy and its actual experience in daily life, and a persistent effort to investigate changing understandings of manhood over time and in different social contexts. That is a broad agenda, and each book fails in its own way to fully meet the goal. Yet that failure is not a result of the chosen form – a traditional social history, like all human activity, would also have its imperfections. Further, I would never claim that my subject was in any fashion representative of his times. That sentiment recalls the well-known 'great man' historiography and obliterates the central dynamic I find interesting, that between the public life and the known private reality. The men I have written about were, however, involved in and engaged with the world about them. By focusing sharply on the choices made

from the possibilities seen in a time not our own, we can learn much about their commitments and those of others, allies and opponents alike. In that interplay, a broader social history entwines with a more private pattern. The result, if done well, sheds light far beyond any individual, even if it does not always reach into every corner of social life. The value, then, of understanding a particular life in its broad social context is precisely this: it examines the process of historical change through an individual who, like other humans, grapples simultaneously with complex forces both public and private.

The scaffolding the biographer erects for this project is itself quite complex. Its foundation is what Hannah Arendt once called the 'brutally elementary data' of historical research itself.[6] To evoke a life in full motion with the world requires a broad and extensive research strategy, one that recognises that the particular is in fact the prism that reveals social as well as personal meaning. Thus, in the process of research, nothing – not the faintest inference – is unimportant. An example from *Debs* will illustrate my point.

Among other qualities, Eugene Debs was known for his hostility to most forms of organised religion. Yet there was a peculiar biblical tone to many of his speeches that suggested a familiarity with the central strands of the Judeo-Christian tradition. At first I found this confusing. Was not socialism the antithesis of religious faith, I innocently asked? I then recalled that Debs grew to adulthood in a particular culture that had been periodically roiled by religious revivals. This led me to explore that environment far more carefully than I might have otherwise (there is very little primary material on Debs' early years). I began to uncover a powerful political culture in his community and in other parts of the American Midwest that avidly melded the millennial promises of American democracy and evangelical Protestantism into what later scholars would call America's civil religion.[7] This not only helped me understand the biblical refrains even in his overtly socialist speeches, it also led me to one of the central themes of that book. When Debs publicly announced himself a socialist in 1897, at age 42, he bore within him a definition of that term that reflected the culture of his childhood. His socialism, and its consequent appeal to many Americans, owed far less to Marx, Engels, or Lenin than to his understandings of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and the promise of American democracy. Had I not stopped to explore those particular rhetorical expressions in his oratory, much would have been lost.

The test, then, for biography is not whether the subject is representative, whatever that may mean, but rather what is it that we might learn from a study of a specific life. The editors of this issue of *Labour History* caught this well when they cited Bernard Bailyn: 'The drama of people struggling with conditions that confine them through cycles of limited life spans is the heart of all living history'. The poignancy of this fundamental human dilemma is what drew me toward biography well before I was conscious of its power. But how, in a practical sense, does one imagine such a research project?

It is not enough, I would insist, to hang the burden of a traditional social or institutional history upon the inert form of the chosen one, occasionally evoking that body to highlight an interpretative point. No. One must rather grant the individual his particularity in all its dimensions – or as many as one can possibly discover; and the biographer must be willing to explore these byways wherever they may lead.

Assume, for a moment, that one's focus is a relatively unknown working man, a local union activist. The records of that union, its local, and other unions with whom there were joint involvements are of obvious importance; as would be union publications, contemporary newspapers, and archival collections of politicians, industrialists, and union leaders as relevant. But to stop there is to truncate the broader task of exploring the tension between the personal and the public, the individual and the social. To the extent possible it is essential to follow one's subject out of the union hall and its political culture and into the other dimensions of his or her life. Not to do this would be to deny to that person and to historical thought the very complexity we as individuals experience daily.

Where might this approach take us? It takes us into the plant, the world of work, where distinctions based on skill, race, ethnicity, gender, and other factors often give a deeper meaning to pronounced claims of group solidarity. Critical too is the home, especially the natal home and its influences. John McGreevy's objection to the 'underlying argument' in discussions of class in contemporary historical writing is well taken. We historians, he wrote, too often assumed without evidence 'that consciousness formed as a laborer is more important that consciousness developed in the home'.[8] The public space surrounding this imagined worker's adult home also carries complex meanings. In cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and elsewhere, white working men and women frequently claimed democracy's promise in the union hall even as they simultaneously fought, politically and physically, the growing presence of black Americans in or near their neighborhoods. Often, the public and private meaning of the home finds its deepest expression in community life, particularly in the church. What faith one embraced or rejected, what church one attended, how the profession of faith encouraged (or not) engagement with social and political life – all this is critical to developing a portrait of a given individual. For what is assured, as we know from our own lives, is that the world's mega-forces – war, economic transformation, political upheaval, and pestilence among them – will inevitably touch the biographical subject. A research agenda both broad and deep allows the biographer to explore the particular response of one individual who occupies a specific social and cultural space without losing perspective on those transformations. Indeed, it is precisely the play between the two that is the crux of the matter.

Biography, of course, is not the only form of historical writing, but it does provide a valuable perspective. As the articles in this issue suggest, recent interest in biographical writing among labor and social historians in many countries has increased. This is welcome, and I hope my comments suggest the serious scope the biographical approach demands. Biography *is* a form of historical writing. Beyond the qualities noted above, it shares certain characteristics with other forms of the discipline. In brief, to grasp the complexity of the past, the historian needs an intellectual and disciplinary rigor, coupled with a supple and sensitive analysis that acknowledges the 'otherness' of that past, and an empathy for one's historical subjects that undermines neither. To attempt less is but to add to posterity's condescension toward history's less famous and least powerful men and women.

Endnotes

* This paper has been peer-reviewed for *Labour History* by two anonymous referees.

1. Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1982.
2. Samuel P. Hayes, 'The Social Analysis of American Political History, 1880-1920', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. LXXX, no. 3, September 1965, pp. 373, 376.
3. → Jonathan M. Wiener, 'Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980', *Journal of American History*, vol. 76, no. 2, September 1989, p. 399. I have always had a complicated relationship with this approach, which I have discussed in greater detail in my article 'Herbert Gutman's Narrative of the American Working Class: a Reevaluation', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1998, pp. 43-80.
4. For a brief overview of these critiques, see Eric Homberg and John Charmley (eds), *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Macmillan, New York, 1988, Introduction and *passim*. On Erickson, see Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, Norton, New York, 1958, pp. 20-21.
5. Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: the Memory Books of Amos Webber*, Times Books, New York, 1996; Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: Reverend C.L. Franklin: the Black Church, and the Transformation of America*, forthcoming, 2005.
6. Hannah Arendt, 'Truth and Politics', as quoted in Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Real Politics: At the Center of Everyday Life*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997, p. 37.
7. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*, Seabury Press, New York, 1975.
8. John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: the Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 4.