

“Social Biographies as World History”

Edmund Burke III

Founder, Center for World History

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What is a Social Biography?

Social Biographies explore the connections between the dense specificity of individual lives and the the larger contexts in which they are embedded. In this way social biographies cast new light on the standard world historical narratives, with their emphasis on large scale change. **Social Biography** encourages us see the connections between the profoundly local and individual on the one hand, and the global and world historical on the other hand. In the process it makes world historical processes visible. The purpose of this document is to provide advice to those who are interested with advice on how to write a social biography.

In my teaching I employed them extensively both with undergraduate and graduate students. For some of the social biographies produced by my graduate students in the period 2006-2008 see this link to the UCSC Center for World History website. <https://cwh.ucsc.edu/social-biographies-as-world-history/>

The approach employed here starts with the notion that everyone is dealt certain cards in life: gender, class, language, religion and ethnicity. These basic social markers along with residence (urban or rural), literacy /access to education, occupation or way of life, and political orientation help provide the framework within which most of us live our lives. By dividing the life of your subject into researchable categories and attempting

to imagine how they navigated from one phase of their life to the next it is possible to insert them into the multiple contexts (from local to global) in which they flourished.

While it is certainly daunting to document fully most ordinary people's lives (just think about all you don't know about the lives of grandparents, parents and friends), the more you can unearth about the probable contexts in which your subject lived, the richer and more complex your social biography will be.

Using your world historian's research skills and historical imagination, the object is to trace for the individual you have selected, how her/his life draws together personal endowments (personality, intelligence, charm, beauty), basic sociological givens (class, gender and ethnicity are some examples), and world historic dangers and opportunities.

Feel free to include unpublished, published and oral sources. (Just be sure you subject them to the same basic historical credibility tests). Because you won't have enough time to cover your subject's entire life, you'll probably want to focus on a particular phase of it. It is also likely that there will be better sources on some parts of the life than others. Social biography is a wonderful opportunity for students to talking across the generations with grandparents and others. It is also provides an opportunity to understand the lives of fellow students and others, and why they made the life choices they did. We all come from somewhere else sooner or later.

A social biography is not a conventional term paper! Don't get obsessed with footnoting the details. Instead think about how to craft a compelling narrative. If you're not having fun, you're probably doing it wrong.

Writing a social biography provides a way of transcending the limitations of social historical and sociological categories. Insofar as you can bring a narrative flair to your writing it will be more effective. Look for particular dramatic incidents in the life of your subject around which to build your story, especially ones which also enable you to bring out the various dimensions of your subject's life. Key to writing a good social biography is to fully engage your historical imagination. Good research and writing skills alone will probably not get the job done.

A note on methodology. It is important to recognize that while these categories have their problems, they are nonetheless useful since most bibliographies are organized with them in mind. It is important, however, to realize their provisionality and openness.) One limitation of these categories is that by sorting groups of people into synchronic (stop action photo) rather than diachronic (history-laden) perspectives social biography tends to miss the ways in which actual people's lives actually worked and why most of us are not so readily contained. In addition, since most social science models were constructed with male persons in mind, they tend completely to overlook the specificities of female life experiences).

Looking for additional models? In addition to my social biographies of Mohand N'Hamoucha and Ali al-Hammi (included on this website). See the selections in David Sweet and Gary Nash (eds.) *Struggle and Survival in the Colonial Americas* (UC Press, 1978) and in Edmund Burke III and David Yaghoubian (eds.), *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* 2nd edition. (U.C. Press, 2005).

Writing Social Biographies: A Step-by-Step Approach

1. *Choosing your subject:*

Some will have sufficient knowledge of their own family to select a person from among their forebears. One can also proceed serendipitously, looking (for example) in ethnographic or travel writing, memoirs, or autobiographies for a subject. Generally, if you can find several mentions of the same individual in different sources, then you may have a potentially researchable life. (Of course if your subject has written an autobiography, you can use this as the base for writing a social biography. In this case, you can get going faster. But you need to be aware that autobiographies like all other sources need to be carefully used).

2. *Researching the subject:*

Once you've found your subject (by whatever means), you must then do the research to enable you to fill in the blanks (provide the necessary complexity) for understanding the life as a social construction that is worked out in terms of (constrained by) multiple social identities (at last some of which may change during a life according to changing circumstances).

3. *Selecting your tools:*

To start, you'll need to find a good general history of the country/region/locale of your subject (not too detailed). Once you've found your subject, a more detailed political history, a good economic history, and a good set of maps (city or country as the case may be) are essential.

4. *Starting work:*

The more research you can do on as many of the following categories as you have time for, the better the final product.

a. Where was your subject born? In what geographic setting is the portion of the life you wish to tell played out? Where did he/she live before and after this period?

b. What were the important societal events that shaped the life of your subject (wars, economic booms or depressions, natural disasters, political upheavals)? (As distinct from personal or familial events). Read general histories of the period and place of your subject's life to glean further details.

c. What is the gender of your subject? What role does this play in the opportunities and limitations on his/her development? Read accounts of the history of gender (the lives of other women or men) for the country and historical period of your subject to further specify their life. Beware of simplistic models of gender, and be open to difference.

d. Who are the important persons in the life of your subject? (a parent, relative, teacher, patron or friend who sets them on a particular path).

e. How/where/when was your subject educated? Check histories of education in the country to help fill in some gaps here. (Autobiographies, memoirs, etc. of others from the same country or region in which education is discussed can help you think about your subject's experiences with education).

f. What was the trade or occupation of your subject (if more than one, the one they had for the period of their life which interests you)? Look for histories of particular trades which can some times be very illuminating.

g. What political affiliations, if any, did your subject have? To fill in this side, you'll need to read some good political histories, including some that specify (where these exist) the particular dynamics locally, regionally, and perhaps by ethnicity of particular parties, groups, tendencies, etc.

h. What are the cultural currents in which your subject swims? Here you'll need to find out as much as you can (where this is relevant) about the specific cultural dynamics of the society: eg., to pick a local example, not just the kind of music they like, but the specific groups, and the lifestyle associated with it, the politics (implicit or explicit) associated with it, etc.

i. The same goes for religion. Here, you'll need to know not just their sect or denomination, if any, (Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), but the specific devotional and religious community to which they are connected, and how it differs from other sub-groups of that religion, its political, economic and other roles in the national community.

The more adept you are at weaving the complex specificities of the individual life and the larger patterns of world historical change, the better (more convincing) your social biography will be.

Just remember to have fun!