

HOW TO WRITE A SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY

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What is Social Biography?

Historians find it difficult to write the lives of ordinary men or women. The sources are often fragmentary if not non-existent. Seeking to situate a life in its various contexts (up to an including world historical) seems only to further complicate an already compromised project. Yet writing social biography as world history has proved a remarkable pedagogical project for many graduate and undergraduate students of world history at UCSC over the last decade.

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. Its particular magic is to make the role of world historical processes in human lives historically visible. The purpose of this document is to provide advice to those who are interested in writing a social biography.

Social biography is an attempt to understand the trajectories of ordinary people's lives through the systematic application of the categories of social history and world history. It seeks to sidestep the paucity of sources through the application of basic research skills and historical imagination. In this way, writing the social biography of an ordinary individual provides an occasion for historians to sharpen their research skills and improve their understanding of social processes.

Social biography challenges the local bias of biography, which fails to look outside the immediate local or national context. It puts the social historian's training to work in locating the plausible social, economic, political and cultural contexts within which the subject's life may have unfolded. Social biographies are therefore provisional inasmuch as complete documentation is lacking. Yet they are also plausible, to the extent that they explore the links between the known facts and contexts in which the life unfolded.

As world history, social biographies actively seek to link the unfolding of people's lives and the large scale historical processes within which they were embedded (for example, the emergence of the world economy and the modern state). By being alert to the ways in which actually people's lives often zigged when they should have zagged, social biographies challenge the determinism of world historical generalizations. In this way they help world historians to better appreciate the limits as well as the power of world historical processes.

Let's Get Started

If you want to write a social biography, you'll need to find a suitable subject, a named individual about whom at least some basic information is available. It needn't be much information. The rest depends upon your ability as a historian to devise research strategies to explain their unfolding in as much detail as you can.

How do you find a suitable subject? Published diaries, memoirs, travel accounts, letters or sources are all good places to look. But in fact the person can be someone mentioned in a history you've read in the context of a class, or someone known to you or someone you know. She may be a person whose name turns up in several different accounts. The main thing is that you become curious about them.

Next note that everyone is dealt certain cards in life: their 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 all provide the contexts within which most of us live our lives. A key to writing a successful social biography is to turn the phases of the life of the person whom you have selected as your subject into researchable topics.

How did their life draw together personal endowments (personality, intelligence, charm, beauty), basic sociological givens (class, gender and ethnicity are some examples), and world historic dangers and opportunities? Imagine how they navigated from one phase of their life to the next. The basic idea is to locate them in as many of the multiple contexts (from local to global) in which they flourished as you can. The more you can unearth about the probable contexts in which your subject lived, the richer and more complex your social biography will be.

For example, suppose you know that your subject was born in a particular city in a particular time. You'll probably know their language they spoke, maybe also their religion and their gender. You should be able to discover what it meant to socially inhabit these identities. How much education did they have? Were they literate? How were they educated, and what did this signify in the society at the time? Perhaps you know their occupation. Look for a history of that trade or occupation in that place. What can you find out about that city in that period? How were different occupations being affected by political and economic change coming from the state and the world economy? Did they move somewhere else in the course of their life? (World historians love such people). How did they manage this, in as much detail as you can discover?

Because you won't have enough the space or time to cover your subject's entire life, you'll probably want to focus on a particular phase of it. Feel free to draw upon unpublished, published and oral sources. (Just be sure you subject them to the same basic credibility tests you would any historical source). 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.

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. A social biography is not a conventional term paper! Don't get obsessed with footnoting the details. 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. If you're not having fun, you're probably doing it wrong.

A note on methodology

It is important to recognize that while social 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) perspective social biography tends to miss the ways in which actual people's lives actually work 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 good models? Check out Jonathan Spence's *Death of Woman Wang*. There are also many well-told lives recounted in David Sweet and Gary Nash (eds.) *Struggle and Survival in the Colonial Americas* (UC Press, 1978) and Edmund Burke III and David Yaghoubian (eds.), *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* 2nd edition. (U.C. Press, 2005).

Social Biography: 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 least 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!