

November 1992

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### Recommended Citation

Carver, Terrell (1992) "Methodological Issues in Writing a Political Biography," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 20 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol20/iss1/2>

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## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN WRITING A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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In this article I would like to raise a number of methodological issues relevant to political biography, and to respond with views developed from my own experience in writing a life of Friedrich Engels (1820-95).<sup>1</sup>

While not a statesman, Engels was a participant in political action, and he was active in politics as a writer. He was part of the most influential intellectual partnership of all time, and he was phenomenally successful in his own right as a political pamphleteer. Additionally some of his ideas were of a theoretical character and survived him in "classic" works. Indeed, posthumous readings of them have eclipsed his actual activities in politics as a speech-maker and organizer, as well as his contemporary influence on others through conversation, correspondence, journalism and books. In effect he had, and still has, a function in twentieth-century politics and beyond, in so far as in contemporary eyes he is a figure of authority, or alternatively a scapegoat.

Now that the edifice of Marxism-Leninism has almost entirely crumbled, Engels's life, career and ideas are open to a fresh reading, as there is little urgency at present to associate him with, or disassociate him from, the historical events between the Russian Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall. My biography details a politics of revolutionary constitutionalism of the 1830s and 1840s which Engels supported and which has been revived, in effect, in the recent mass uprisings. Previously underplayed aspects of his thought are now clearly exposed, and contemporary events can be approached with a richer understanding of their antecedents.

As implied in the title I shall focus on methodological issues and keep my subject in the background. However, methodological discussions ought to refer to actual projects, and I hope that my report is illustrative and potentially generalizable.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Biography is of course historical narrative, and in recent years the author-narrative-subject-reader-audience nexus has been questioned or “deconstructed.” Subjects, such as biographical ones, are said to be ultimately inaccessible, in that their inner motives could never have been projected into some external “evidence,” accessible to a biographer, without remainder or distortion. Meaning is said to lie solely in narrative, not in any “matching” between concept and object. Different meanings are said to arise in different readers, as they put their own constructions on narratives. The author is therefore said to be dead.<sup>2</sup>

Or, rather, there is now enormous suspicion of authors. They are no longer regarded even in principle as reliable media through which “facts” about subjects can reach readers. Authors’ assumptions and judgments are under scrutiny; they are presumed to be the subtext or hidden agenda of narratives; texts are said to incorporate “absences” as well as “presences.”<sup>3</sup> Scholarly biographies, heavy with footnotes and learning, are no exception.

Narrative is crucial to understanding; neither texts nor lives are “strings of propositions.” Texts are related to arguments and lives to motives, as Quentin Skinner has argued.<sup>4</sup> Both lives and texts must be considered much more carefully now that the age of philosophical innocence for political biographers is over.

In my own narrative I confronted the reader with myself as biographer by intruding into the biography and listing questions that I propose to answer. I give guiding questions for the work as a whole, so that the reader will know why I undertook it; and I give more specific questions for each chapter (or sometimes pair of chapters). I recognize that readers should not be burdened with unwanted autobiography, but it is fair to identify oneself to an audience as having some things in mind quite specifically and not others. The reader should be aware that the biography emerges from a biographer with intentions, and not from some god-like consciousness that is omniscient and omnipresent.

I think it likely that readers find it restful to assume that biographers are all-knowing, because they have burrowed into every archive, and all-wise, because they have selected just what is necessary to make the narrative go. Biographers and readers have both found it easy to pretend that the biographer is a “time lord,” opening a “time tunnel” down which readers can peer in utter transparency and thus recapture the past as it was. In a sense there has been a conspiracy of trust between biographer and audience. This, in my view, should be replaced by mutual

suspicion, otherwise a mutual tendency to intellectual laziness takes over.

## THE NARRATIVE FRAME

Biographies are traditionally but only seemingly framed by the birth and death of the subject. Generally the "life" as presented in a biographical narrative is preceded by "brief lives" of forebears and identification of "influences," whether persons or ideas or books. This may extend to essays on the "spirit of the times" or cultural tradition or whatever. All these devices serve to determine the subject's consciousness and to discount the subject's own will. To counter this common way of conceptualizing the subject I deliberately alluded to the careers of others in the Engels family who were the "products" of virtually identical "influences," but were never remotely like Friedrich in terms of what they attempted and accomplished or even thought, so far as is known.

Indeed "what is known" became a major theme in my work, in that I also reminded the reader that history, including biography, is an archaeological exercise. Only certain kinds of materials, and only certain exemplars at that, happen to have survived to the present. Thus one has to be extremely careful in drawing definitive conclusions about the subject on the basis of whatever materials happen to have been preserved.

I drew the conclusion concerning some matters in the biography that surviving materials allow us merely to note an ambiguity or unsolved problem; and concerning other issues I deliberately drew a variety of contrasting conclusions, since it seemed to me that several plausible narratives were compatible with the "evidence." I also speculated on the nature and content of materials, indeed immaterial things like conversations, that did not, or could not, have survived as they happened at the time. Obviously the reader has to be warned that these are speculations, and it is extremely important in my approach that such "absences" should be flagged for attention. By working from what is known to what is unknown, however, some speculations can be promoted as more plausible than others. I mention this particularly because such "black-hole" categories as "unrecorded conversations" have been used in Marx-Engels studies to fill out hypotheses in ways that conform more closely to the biographer's views than to the materials that have survived.<sup>5</sup>

The death of the subject comes traditionally at the close of the biography, though not at the absolute end, as the biographical "frame" generally includes the subject's posthumous influence.

During their own lifetimes biographical subjects are events in other people's lives, and they continue in that role after their deaths. Their works are sometimes published long after their deaths, and they become objects of interpretation.

Engels is particularly interesting in this respect as he established an interpretive context around himself ("Marx's junior partner") and around Marx (the "materialist philosopher who inverted Hegel," the "Darwin of the social sciences," the "revolutionary fighter" for communism). Moreover, as much as Engels's biographers determined his consciousness through traditional narrative methods, so in turn did he determine the consciousness of his biographers. He did this by establishing a narrative about himself in relation to Marx; about Marx in relation to politics; and about his own, his and Marx's, and Marx's own works in relation to philosophy and science.

## NARRATIVE TIME

Narrative time in biography often moves in ways of which the biographer is perhaps not conscious, or at least not too willing to inform the reader. Narrative time is really space on the printed page, as biographers dwell longer (in terms of words to be read) on some topics than on others. A number of different considerations may dictate the structure of the recovered "life" in this sense.

One is simply the amount of material to which the biographer has access; for example there may be enormous amounts of "late" correspondence, but little juvenilia. Another is the way that the biographer periodizes the "life." This of course reflects the overall view that the biographer takes of the subject's "career," and that naturally reflects what the biographer thinks is important about the subject. What was actually important to the subject in attempting to determine his/her life tends to fade out here, and the importance of the subject, or the subject's writings, or the idea of the subject, as these appear in the lives of others, tends to take center stage in the narrative.

The "importance" of the subject in "history" (as lived out by other people) thus becomes the subject's "narrative life" within the biographical "frame," and I have striven not to allow that in my work. Partly this is because Engels's reputation and influence are very well documented elsewhere; partly because I did not want events or activities as they occurred in his life to assume an anachronistic importance; and partly because I wished to experiment with a biography that was rooted in life as lived by the subject in order to create a contrast with traditional narrative which was frankly mythological.

Why the biographer thinks some things are important about the subject and not others is often not explicitly revealed. Some biographers may regard what is important about the subject as already fixed, and new biographies merely add to "facts" already known an interpretation that may feebly be described as "fresh." But the subject remains a great politician or poet or writer or whatever, just as we originally thought. In that way biographers reproduce interpretive traditions, and those traditions dictate what amongst the subject's remains is "public" and supposedly lasting, and what is "private" and presumably trivial. An interpretive tradition thus acts to determine the subject's consciousness and the reader's perceptions; Engels could never have wanted to be an artist, for example, or make a career in the theatre (though we have his early sketchbooks and a libretto). Indeed we do not know what his career plans were in his early youth; perhaps he did not know either. Biographers generally race through juvenilia at blinding speed, unless it happens to foreshadow later activities which "posterity" has judged important.

"Posterity" plays a large role in dictating narrative space, in that books or manuscripts which were of little importance to anyone, perhaps even the subject at the time, sometimes become important events in the narrative world. An example is *The German Ideology* manuscripts in Engels's hand which went unpublished (and unwanted) for many years. The biographer's audience may be told that the subject's ignorant contemporaries had no idea what they were missing. The overwhelming impression that readers take away from such narratives is that the subject is yet another lonely genius adrift in an ungrateful world. This of course devalues the subject's contemporaries and abstracts the subject out of any plausible conception of the everyday activities and circumstances of which a life actually consists.

## CHARACTERS AND DRAMATURGY

I decided to confront the reader directly, and initially, with my subject's continuing, everyday relationships, as all his life he was a son or brother or uncle or lover or friend to a very large number of people, relatively few of whom were communists. Bringing these associates back to life is obviously particularly difficult, as they exist for us only in letters and memoirs. The letters extant are almost wholly those written by Engels, rather than by his correspondents, and the memoirs of him that are available were almost wholly composed within the interpretive tradition that he himself helped to create.

Yet there is a cast of supposedly unimportant characters in Engels's life, as in everyone's. Few biographers are interested in house-keepers, unmarried sisters, elderly mothers, wholly domestic spouses or partners, and so forth. I decided to bring them in ahead of the more famous "names" that form a central part of the narrative tradition, as it was with the non-famous that the subject's everyday life was lived. Indeed they clearly occupied an enormous amount of his time. This is not to say that I can find much of them to recover, but I thought that they should be resurrected from silence and exhibited to the reader in order to dramatize the distinction between the subject's "lived" experience and the narrative "life" constructed by a biographer. In the case of Engels, at least, most of these relatively silent characters are bound to be women.

Drama plays a very large role in interpretive traditions, in that some "events" are emphasized—independently of the space they occupy in the book—by the biographer, so that the reader can be apprised of "turning points," or "setbacks" or other cruces in the "life." The initial Marx-Engels meetings are a case in point, as Engels's early life is generally conceptualized such that his first meeting with Marx was poignantly "cold." His second meeting, by dramatic contrast, is presented as the denouement of his previous activities and the overture to his "real life." Indeed the fact that these events are portrayed as "Marx-Engels" meetings, even in biographies of the latter, gives the game away, in that the focus of most work on Engels is really Marx, not the subject himself!

I worked hard to make the meetings Engels-Marx meetings; to make Marx a character in Engels's life; and to keep Marx from taking over the narrative, as he often threatened to do. At the same time modern readers naturally relate Engels to Marx, and I took care in considering their early years to construct detailed comparisons between Marx's early achievements (actually rather modest), and Engels's own interests and output (far more impressive).

These dramatic moments are of course constructs, often traceable to memoirists and early biographers; very plausibly the people involved in these circumstances had little sense at the time of this "importance." Their actions and reactions within the narrative drama thus move them into a world-historical realm, where most readers would like them to be, and where they never actually were. This again has the effect of determining the consciousness of individuals, who were once real, and recovering them to readers today as characters in a prose-drama. Transfer to the stage and screen is thus but a step away.

## NARRATIVE PURPOSE

What a biography is actually for should always be an issue for biographer and reader, and at least in mine I made it so. Worship or denigration of the subject seems to me to be an insufficient motive for writing a biography, especially when the order of service or *auto da fe* is so relentlessly laid down by predecessors. Modern theories of structuration take socialization and agency with equal seriousness, and I was interested to show the reader the extent to which a supposedly familiar "character" could be reconstructed as a choice-making agent.<sup>6</sup> In my narrative Engels was someone who experimented with ideas and relationships, a person who lived out ambiguities of which he was aware, a politician who retreated from action to writing. Ironically Engels was himself the author of a deterministic philosophy, and an advocate of highly willful agency, and thus set the terms, to some extent, for contemporary attempts to resolve this issue theoretically.

Engels's early works reveal the indeterminacy of the subject's mind and show the "formative" process as contingent on circumstances quite outside himself/herself and just as indeterminate. Whilst human activity is unlikely to be random in the true sense, there is certainly an element of unpredictability that must be presumed, as we each presume it about ourselves and our own decisions. No one lives life as if determinism were true, and similarly no one can successfully present themselves as completely unconstrained by the ideas of others, even as interpreted in their own consciousness. Engels's father, for instance, made deliberate decisions to constrain his son. These were just the sort of decisions that one would have expected an industrialist of the Ruhr to have made at that time. In turn Engels junior, while constrained physically, financially and emotionally within institutions and assumptions set by others, chose to broaden his experience in quite contrary ways. My narrative brings out the indeterminacy and ambiguity of these situations and choices in ways that make his early years more lively and his later ones more controversial. But after he was 24 I took him to be somewhat less of an agent, in that he was demonstrably less experimental, and in particular he kept himself in circumstances that he did not alter in fundamental ways.

One of the other themes I chose to explore in my biography concerned the extent to which writing and politics are coincident activities, and the extent to which one may preclude the other. Literary biographers perhaps have a similar problem when confronting works of literature which, for the subject, were also ways



of making a living in the basest sense. Even where the issue is raised, the gravity and necessity of the subject's struggles with quotidian economics often pale before the "world-historical" context of "lasting achievement" in which the biographer's narrative is located. The narrative tradition about Engels decrees that his written words were political acts, and that important political acts were quite naturally acts of publication, specifically the publication of works that have "lasted." In the case of Engels some of those published works could do with a decent burial, and others should be dusted off since the present situation—in which I somewhat authoritatively locate myself and my readers—now differs from the context in which the largely unchanging interpretive tradition was established. These interests supported my allocation of one-half of the narrative space-time to hitherto little-regarded early works.

My investigation of the situation surrounding Engels's early works exposed the extent to which the subject engaged in political activities that were not themselves the business of writing and publishing major works. This produced in my narrative as a whole something like the hallowed "formative" pattern of development—but in reverse. That is, the subject successively withdrew from various activities as chronological time went on. As Engels's career proceeded he lost skills and interests, such as speech-making to the public and party-political organizing amongst workers. In his early days of "practical" activity he had upbraided his principal collaborator Marx for undue bookishness, inopportune reluctance to engage with real workers, and neglect of day-to-day politics. Later he dropped this line of criticism as it would have applied all too clearly to himself, and indeed he dropped all lines of criticism of Marx, as he had hitched his own career to Marx's in no uncertain terms.

## NARRATIVE AND EXPERIENCE

My organization of narrative time introduces a further element of "lived experience" into biography, in that perceived time when we face new circumstances slows down, and conversely routinized events flow swiftly. This perspective is delineated in *The Magic Mountain*, as Hans Castorp's arrival and early encounters at the sanatorium are supposedly experienced more slowly by the character himself, than events taking place later when the situation is more familiar.<sup>7</sup> The narrative space presented in tactile form to the reader reflects this "lived experience" rather than strictly equal units of chronology. I judged the later years of my subject to be somewhat routine, and so cut down the narrative space that they

occupied. This of course telescopes chronological time, and treats the sheer amount of "material" that remains from that period in a highly selective manner. The reader is warned of this and is referred to a literature that exists outside the biography itself, particularly to my own works, as I declined to reproduce them to make the present biography "comprehensive."<sup>8</sup>

My own narrative, moreover, is methodologically discontinuous, and critics will probably take this to be further evidence of an unwanted authorial intrusion into the traditional way that narrative and time interact in biography. I treated my subject's early years (up to age 24) in a narrative that combined thematic and chronological exposition. For his "life" in maturity I adopted a technique of "inverse nesting." Most biographies of figures similar to mine prioritize their intellectual life, and introduce their politics and personal quirks as the narrative proceeds, in order to provide useful motives for the subject and light relief for the reader. By contrast I chose to survey the mature years of the subject's "personal" life from 24 through 75 in a central chapter. (I confess I could not kill him off by mentioning the word "death" mid-way through the book.) Successive chapters on his political activities, including a convenient clutch of "minor writings," and on his intellectual "major writings," bring the narrative to the point of conclusion. In that way the personal and political "performative contexts" of his "thought" are set out in advance by me.<sup>9</sup>

As I deal with Engels's "thought" I confront the reader with a highly critical evaluation. These mature works of philosophy and social science are themselves readily accessible, so I did not reproduce them *in extenso*. This will no doubt annoy those who wish to be saved the trouble of reading the works complete or making their own abridgements. Moreover I did not reproduce critical material of my own that is published elsewhere for the same reason. The last chapter is thus somewhat breathless.

Yet for me Engels's "enduring legacy" no longer necessarily lies in those works, but elsewhere, particularly in his early revolutionary constitutionalism, his essays into party politics and his concern with the causes and consequences of economic stratification in industrial societies. I hope that some readers might be at least a little grateful for sparing them extended discussions of *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*. Those works were historically important in the decades following Engels's death, and this is not to be denied. However, I take it that "what is important for us" about Engels can itself be reinterpreted, because who "we" are and what "important" means, can be expected to change over time, perhaps very profoundly.

## NARRATIVE TRADITION

No matter how resolutely the subject's reputation is inscribed in the narrative tradition for certain "great" works or "significant" acts or "influential" thoughts, there is always the possibility of a radical reassessment. Indeed I would suggest that received interpretive traditions should be changed for the sake of it. As biographers are necessarily different people, and as their situations are inevitably different, there is little point in successive biographers reproducing the same biography. In a short story Jorge Luis Borges invents an author who rewrites certain chapters of *Don Quixote* exactly matching the text of Cervantes, not from an imaginative recreation of the sixteenth century, but from twentieth-century experience itself. Borges presumes that this exercise would require an immense exercise of concentration and intellect.<sup>10</sup> Actually I think that a number of biographers and commentators manage this kind of feat with relatively little difficulty.

From our present perspective we are entitled to pick over the past, including past lives. These exercises in the "genealogy" of the present and the "archaeology" of the past must necessarily differ, depending on authorial inclination.<sup>11</sup> I was rather lucky in unearthing Engels the revolutionary constitutionalist just before a massive wave of revolutionary constitutionalism. The fact that his influence as a revolutionary constitutionalist was circumscribed within his own lifetime does not argue against examining his politics as an exemplar. In that way we look more closely at the "genealogy" of modern democracy, and we gain an "archaeological" distance from its current forms. By looking behind our present political context, and by stepping outside it, we perceive options for the future.

An unexamined present necessarily yields a future that is more of the same. Narrative traditions are among the nightmares that weigh on the brain of the living, as Marx commented in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.<sup>12</sup> In my view biography too often succumbs to *rigor mortis*, and it is up to biographers to work harder to make it live. Biographers could inspire a critical assessment of almost any issue, as any reasonable recovery of a life would raise matters of contemporary importance. This can be done in ways that merely reinforce received "truths" that are amongst the most efficacious props of current power structures. Or it can be done in ways that challenge these structures by questioning traditional conceptualizations. Biography is not a window on the past, but a political act in the present.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Terrell Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> See John W. Murphy, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> On these themes see Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 272-3, and his citations in the notes on pp. 337-8 of works by Ricoeur, Gadamer, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida. See also Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Centrality of the Classics," in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner (eds), *Social Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 32-4, for a discussion of Husserl and further comment on Derrida.

<sup>4</sup> See Skinner, "Reply," *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> On this theme and on general issues concerning truth, science and narrative, see Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> On the theme of agency in history see Alex Callinicos, *Making History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), and Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 541-5.

<sup>8</sup> See David McLellan's criticism of my book in his review "The Pursuit of Contradiction" in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (London), 23 February 1990, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> See Skinner, "Reply," *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," in *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> See Michael T. Gibbons, "Interpretation, Genealogy, and Human Agency," and Fred Dallmayr, "Political Inquiry: Beyond Empiricism and Hermeneutics," in Terence Ball (ed.), *Idioms of Inquiry: Critique and Renewal in Political Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980).