

## Abstract

This article makes a claim for the scientific character of biography. The argument is constructed using, on the one hand, the epistemological gaps identified by the harshest critic of biography, Pierre Bourdieu, and, on the other, the conceptual and methodological arguments that defenders of biography (such as Franco Ferrarotti, François Dosse, and Giovanni Levi) have made to place the discipline at the heart of innovative trends in historiography. The objective of this study is to demonstrate both the epistemological and hermeneutical potential of biography in constructing social contexts for sociological and historical analysis.

*Keywords: biography, Pierre Bourdieu, historiography, hermeneutics.*

## Introduction

Of the social scientists of the twentieth century, it was perhaps Pierre Bourdieu who most acutely identified the epistemological problems of biography. His critiques on the practice were so vehement that anyone dedicated to the study of the genre can hardly overlook them. Even social scientists who do not share his theoretical outlook, it would seem, are forced to take his critiques into account since, ironically, it is in Bourdieu's supposed refutation of biography that we can find ways out of the epistemological problems that have forever plagued the discipline. Hence, while Bourdieu denies biography any scientific character whatsoever, in this article we will attempt to address his objections and thus hopefully to overcome them—that is, to create a counterpoint to the critiques that he has made in order to show alternatives for the biographical genre, a field with great heuristic and hermeneutical possibilities.

To develop the above ideas, this essay is divided into four parts and a short conclusion. In the first part we will present the objections Bourdieu expressed to biographical investigation. In the second and third, with the help of other authors, we will propose a series of responses to such objections, outlining at the same time some methodological alternatives for biographical practice. And in the fourth part, we will conduct a didactic exercise, describing the investigative work of an imaginary biographer in order to demonstrate how one might play with *the biographical illusion* without getting lost in the effort.

## Biography: A Genre Under Scrutiny?

Throughout his work Pierre Bourdieu made frequent reference to biographical studies, but it is without a doubt his article “The Biographical Illusion” that best consolidates his viewpoint on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Here, Bourdieu denies biography any analytical character whatsoever; he categorically states that, insofar as it is based on an artificial creation of coherence, biography is a scientific absurdity. Bourdieu claims that biography suffers from a dangerous problem of subjectivism, one that leads the biographer into a series of traps or illusions with no escape. Thus he decries the ambiguous relationship established between the biographer and the biographical subject, in the sense that the first, in attempting to give interpretive coherence to the existence of

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<sup>1</sup> The article “The Biographical Illusion” was first published in 1986. [citation in English]

the second, tends to become ideologue and accomplice in his or her life. With the combative tone that characterizes his writings, he asserts:

[...]

Summarizing Bourdieu, the subjective implications of biography would lead the investigator into the following illusions. The first is to believe that a person's existence has a particular unique character, one which in its singularity should express its own historicity, as though a person's individual trajectory could *account for* an unrepeatable historical process and were not in fact a product of structural preconditions that also weigh on the category of individuals. The second illusion is to seek in the trajectory of an individual an evolution that is linear-chronological, in which a succession of events is tied up one to the next and directed toward the completion of an ultimate goal, falling thus into the fallacy of a teleological, monocausal process. The third consists in supposing that just as with the name of a person, which doesn't change over the course of a lifetime, the person too could possess a unified identity capable of remaining stable regardless of the circumstances, the time period, or the place. In doing so, one would be denying the plurality of identities, always dynamic and in no few cases contradictory, that in effect a person possesses. Surely these illusions would cause the biographer to assume that the subject has a coherent *lifetime* trajectory, one that would endow the subject with implicit intentionality, pushing his or her existence toward the accomplishment of some supreme goals which, of course, the biographer knows in advance. Moreover, the biographer's prior knowledge of the way the subject's life ends would lead him or her to force impossible *articulations* and to connected unconnected events, in the hopes of giving coherence to character's life, falling thus into essentialism. In light of the above, Bourdieu rejects all scientific qualities of biography and concludes emphatically:

[...]

From his metaphor of the trip "on a subway without taking into account the structure of the network," we can infer that Bourdieu privileges the study of social structures that condition the actions of an individual. More precisely, he maintains that in order to avoid subjectivism and the illusions that it entails, it is necessary to reconstruct the context in which the studied person behaves. This, in terms of his own theory, supposes before anything else an understanding of the successive states of the distinct fields in which the life of the biographical subject unfolds. This, then, would necessitate a study of the objective relations in which the biographical subject is bound together with other individuals, at least in the areas relevant to the case. "This prior construction," he writes, "is likewise a condition of any rigorous evaluation of what might be called the *social surface*, as rigorous description of the *personality* designated by the proper name" (Bourdieu, 1997: 82).

In another of his texts, continuing his inquiries into the scientific legitimacy of biography, we find what might be considered a proposal to overcome the epistemological problems described above. In *Field of Power and Field of the Intellect*, he rails against Sartre's biographical study of Flaubert, accusing the author of having lost himself in the illusions described above. He says: "The fact is that Sartrean analysis depends on the interminable and desperate temptation to integrate all the objective truth of an individual condition, history and work, into the artificial unity of an originative project" (Bourdieu, 1983: 18). Bourdieu is

vehement in his defense of the way scientific work, according to him, should be undertaken. He insists that the only scientific path for biography would be based on a structural analysis of the relational systems that determine the state of the fields and the distinct *habitus* that the agents possess due to their position in the social structure.

In Bourdieu's analysis, 'fields' are social spaces that form around the evaluation of scientific, artistic, political, and cultural events, among others. They are force fields that establish objective social relationships, in which individuals compete to occupy a place in the hierarchy, which is generated among actors who hold different types of capital—symbolic, political, economic, etcetera. In this sense fields constitute, internally and in their connection with other fields, networks of class relations where conflicts are generated over the acquisition of different types of capital. From this it follows that each field can achieve degrees of autonomy which may lead them to compete amongst themselves within the greater field of power that pervades the entire social structure.

In this interwoven network of social relations, individuals have a defined position that causes them to act within the confines of certain historical possibilities. That is to say, the objective situation that social actors occupy within distinct fields conditions them to certain kinds of behavior, certain modes of feeling and thought. The latter is what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, which consists of the social practices that an individual has acquired throughout his/her social formation: tastes, abilities, language, ways of expressing opinions and making decisions. In general, the *habitus* functions unconsciously, since it is a historical product, or rather, the manner in which the individual synthesizes a society within his/her own person. And so the *habitus* is at once what generates the reenactment of existing relations of domination and also the possibility of transforming them, since on the one hand the *habitus* functions as a form of control for those atop the hierarchies of power, while on the other it is what allows the margin of action that the dominated have to transform the social structure.

This said, we can now understand why Bourdieu contends that biographical studies must begin with the structural analysis of relational systems, since it would be these which define the state of the fields and the *habitus* the actors take on due to their objective situation within them. From this point of view, it is evident that for Bourdieu the most important task would be to explain the *habitus* generated among groups of individuals who share similar positions within the distinct fields and among them. It follows that what is pertinent is not the individual, nor the particular events, but finally the structural conditions that produce behaviors and events among different groups of individuals. For this reason Bourdieu unequivocally disqualifies the question that Sartre poses about Flaubert, and which is the same question nearly all biographers ask themselves about their subjects: In what way did Fulano de Tal come to be what he is? This, according to Bourdieu, is a specious question because no individual is truly original, nor does a life adhere to any implicit plan that must be completed in a teleological way. What is important, in the case of an intellectual biography, to take Bourdieu's example, is to ask:

[...]

Following this interrogation, and taking as an example the intellectual experiences of the particular writer investigated by Sartre, Bourdieu proposes that the response should be made first with an analysis divided into various moments, which nevertheless would be interwoven in the

analysis. As if it were a motor with three speeds, his method would be the following: firstly, one must conduct an analysis of the objective position occupied by the intellectuals in the structure of the dominant class, keeping in mind the sort of connection that they bear to that position, namely, whether they belong to it, either by origin or condition.

The following step would consist in an examination of the objective relations between the different groups of intellectuals within the structure of the intellectual field, for which one would have to take into account the disputes that arise over the legitimacy of certain intellectual currents in a given era. This, then, would require establishing the special logic that governs, in the historical moment in question, both the intellectual field and the field of power as a whole. As the reader will remember, all fields exist within the field of power, and for this reason one must likewise analyze the grade of autonomy that the intellectual field has achieved with respect to other fields and, in particular, to that of power. Only having analyzed the preceding conditions might we understand the margin of possible action available to the individuals of to the subject's category, i.e. the *habitus* the subject belongs to as a result of his/her location in the structural system of social relations.

Hence, the third phase would consist in reconstructing the *habitus*, which is what would definitively allow for us to understand the conjunction of practices and ideologies, ways of thinking and acting prevalent in distinct categories of the field under scrutiny. This would help not only to explain the works and actions of the biographical subject, but also—and this without a doubt is what is truly important for Bourdieu's project—to understand the distinct groups of intellectuals that exist in the era in question, the position that they have in the social structure and, therefore, their ideological and creative possibilities. The working margin of different intellectual groups to act would be conditioned by the degree of autonomy achieved by the intellectual field against the field of power, the latter being dominated in the modern era by distinct fractions of the bourgeoisie. Thus, given that intellectuals tend to display a material and political dependence on the dominant bourgeois groups, their actions show degrees of independence only insofar as they attain autonomy in their field. This independence is possible in virtue of the development of a market for symbolic goods, with the ability to impose its own sanctions, and which would make possible a wider margin of action for intellectuals.

It would be fair to state, following Bourdieu, that in order to escape from the traps or illusions that biography entails, one must study the social structure that conditions the thought and actions of the individuals in the biography. Doubtless this is an objectivist claim. It bears repeating: one must reconstruct the network of objective social relations that governs the subject and other actors of the same group, who like the subject have the same possibilities within the social structure. This would be the escape proposed by Bourdieu, to break with the complicity with the subject that the biographer implicitly assumes in attempting to give coherence to a life, creating the artificial sense of an existence that has nothing permanent in it but the name that appears on the birth certificate.

### **Regarding Bourdieu's Critiques of the Biographical Genre**

We can't deny that Pierre Bourdieu put his finger in the wound of biographical study. His critiques go straight to the heart of the fundamental epistemological problems of the discipline.

Except for the most naïve biographers or radical postmodernists, few social scientists would dare pass over the fact that biographical investigation is riddled with traps, rightly dubbed illusions by Bourdieu. And so, rather than seek to invalidate his assertions we must take them as a series of challenges in the difficult task of biography. It is for this reason that the goal of this article is to assume these critiques as a starting point to search out escapes to the labyrinth that the practice of biography supposes.

That there exists an extreme subjectivist implication on the part of the biographer with respect to the subject is certain. Likewise it is true that the biographer finds him/herself caught up in the fantasy of wanting the subject's life to contain an absolute history with a proper beginning and end, chronologically linear, like a continuous process that conceals a teleological development. The above implies an attempt to give coherence to the life of the subject, when what is certain is that all human existence is discontinuous, discordant and plural. To endeavor to the contrary would be to slip into essentialism, since the temptation to give a life coherence would necessarily require a preconceived logic in the selection of events, especially when the biographer has prior knowledge of what the biographical subject eventually became, motivating him/her to show the achievement of certain goals that need to be achieved. In this vein the biographer would derive a totalizing fiction in which the story told would be like the movement of a closed circle, of the trajectory of an individual that came into the world to complete certain objectives in the form of a kind of predestined messiah.

Nevertheless, if we were to follow Bourdieu down to the letter we would be renouncing the very genre of biography, since from his scientific perspective biographical investigation turns out to be radically invalid. This is clear not only in the critiques that the author makes but also in the alternative that he proposes to escape the biographical illusion, one which consists, as we have seen, in privileging the study of structural logics as the way to understand individual practices, or rather, as the way to explain the behaviors of social groups where the subjects would only be examples that serve to verify social norms. Therefore Sartre's Flaubert would not have any relevance of study in the way that the objective relations in which he was involved within the social field would. This becomes perfectly clear when we remember Bourdieu's metaphor of the subway map: telling the story of the life of an individual is as absurd as explaining a trip on the subway without any knowledge of the structure of the network.

If indeed we consider Bourdieu's critiques to be fair, we cannot follow him in the alternative he proposes to the epistemological problems he sees in biography. To accept his proposal would be to trade the risk of subjectivism for the reductivist risk of structuralism, the latter of which is certainly crushing for the case of biographical studies. In other words, it would be like administering a treatment that is worse than the illness, since the medicine would end up killing the patient, eliminating in this case what is specific to the biographical genre: its subjective nature, its preoccupation with the particular, its irreducible antinomothetic character and its special historicity. As François Dosse affirms, basing his argument on authors who criticize Bourdieu's alternative, "the objective is, therefore, to objectivize the subjective and subjectivize the objective" (Dosse 2007: 213), with which he would seek to escape from the false dilemma between the individual-structural, subjective-objective, particular-general, etcetera.