

Gomes, Ângela M. de Castro;  
Schmidt, Benito Bisso (Org.).  
*Memórias e narrativas (auto) biográficas*

Weder Ferreira da Silva\*

Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV; Porto Alegre: Ed. UFRGS, 2009. 278p.

The enthusiasm of historians for research in the field of biographical and autobiographical research has been gaining space in recent publications in Brazil and in the world. A brief glance at publishers' catalogues and at bookshop shelves will show that the country is experiencing a great increase in publications of a biographical and autobiographical nature – by way of example we can cite *O retorno de Martin Guerre* by Natalie Z. Davis (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987) and *D. Pedro II* by José Murilo de Carvalho (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007).

This enthusiasm of researchers in the social sciences is due to the fact that contact with primary sources, documents, papers, letters, notes and photographs is capable of revealing aspects that were unknown or even invisible until then in the social world experienced by 'common' men and women and by those of greater importance in history. This sensation is strengthened when the material escapes from the institutional rigors of documentary production, serial characteristics and bureaucratic formats, and has a private origin or a personal nature, conferring the impression of contact with very intimate aspects of the history of the people involved. Access to these sources has the strength of simulating transport in time, the immersion experience as directly lived, without mediations.<sup>1</sup> In parallel to this movement, it is important to highlight that readers are increasingly interested in a certain genre of writing – writing about oneself – which includes diaries, letters, biographies and autobiographies, independent of whether they are memories or interviews about life trajectories, for example.

As Giovanni Levi has highlighted, our archivist fascination with descriptions that are impossible to corroborate due to the lack of documentary

---

\* Doctoral Candidate in Social History, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais, UFRJ. Largo de São Francisco de Paula, nº 1, sala 205. Centro. 20051-070 Rio de Janeiro – RJ – Brasil. wedhistoria@yahoo.com.br

records feeds not just the renovation of historical narrative, as well as interest in new types of sources – in which sparse indications can be discovered of acts and words from the daily life of social actors.<sup>2</sup> The publication of *Memórias e narrativas (auto)biográficas*, organized by Ângela de Castro Gomes and Benito Bisso Schmidt, is part of this historiographical movement.

The set of texts presented in the book constitutes a significant example of the so-called writings about oneself or self-referential writings which have been gaining space in the field of historiography, thereby illustrating the various possibilities and results of research that have used these writings as a source of historical investigation. *Memórias e narrativas (auto)biográficas* thus presents to the reader a new heuristic possibility for private archives. According to the organizers of the book, “the attention of many historians is aimed at private archives, in which they look not just for traces of the actions and ideas of their characters, but also the form in which they constituted themselves, how they selected and guarded their documents and thereby proposed a meaning for their lives” (p.7).

In the wake of the transformations which historiography has undergone since the 1980s, biography, i.e., the individual has emerged as a relevant theme for the understanding not only of the social, but also of questions linked to the ‘invention’ of oneself. These new approaches have come to occupy privileged spaces in historic knowledge, thereby raising reflections about the private and public space, about the individual and the collective, and about the narrative and analytical forms of the writing of history. From this emerges the importance of personal collections as elements for the understanding of the ‘social surface’ in which the individual acts in a multiplicity of fields at every moment. In the texts that compose this book it can be seen that autobiographical narratives clearly show that the trajectory of an individual varies in time, which highlights once again what Pierre Bourdieu calls biographical illusion – the illusion of the linearity and coherence of the individual.<sup>3</sup> Having said this, it is also worth stressing Paul Ricoeur’s proposition, according to whom the history of a life of an individual does not cease to be refigured by all the true or fictitious histories that a subject tells of himself. This refiguration makes his own life a fabric of narrated histories.<sup>4</sup>

The texts that are part of this book are divided into four parts. The first – ‘The historian between history and memory’ – consists of an article by Sabina Loriga in which the author looks at the ‘porous frontiers’ between history and memory. Based on *A memória, a história, o esquecimento* by Paul Ricoeur (Campinas: Ed. Unicamp, 2007), the historian weaves considerations about

the multiple relations established between history and memory. In this way Loriga's text anticipates the historiographical context in which the subsequent articles of the work are situated.

In the second part of the book Ângela de Castro Gomes, Haike Roselane Kleber da Silva, Yonissa Marmitt Wadi and Keila Rodrigues de Souza look at aspects of the trajectories of individuals based on correspondence they exchange. To the reader it is evident that epistolary documentation allows the 'decomposition' of the lives of individuals, approximating their private sphere of action. By investigating the exchange of correspondence between leading political and intellectual figures in the First Republic, the letters of Germanists in Brazil and letters of people who have committed self-violence, the authors weave reflections about the construction of the I, demonstrating that the writings themselves are also constituted in places of memory.

Following this, Joseli Maria Nunes Mendonça, Benito Bisso Schmidt and Gisele Venâncio are concerned with investigating how certain social actors construct their images through autobiographical narratives. These analyses are revealing for thinking about the strategies used – whether consciously or not – in the process of the construction of oneself. In this specter of analysis it is possible to note the disputes, the silences, the hyperbole, in short the oscillations of the narratives that intend to 'forge' an image of themselves projected into posterity.

Finally, the articles of Márcia de Almeida Gonçalves, Bruno Barreto Gomide, Marcelo Timotheo da Costa and Maria Elena Bernardes have the object of analyzing biographical and autobiographical production intended to trace a social and existential meaning for the trajectories of notable Brazilian politicians and intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the chapter which closes the book Maria Elena Bernardes makes an incursion into the instigating life trajectory of the writer and communist activist Laura Brandão. In this biography, as in a game of scales, the author articulates aspects of the life of the activist with more ample elements of the history of Brazil and of the world, thereby revealing the potentials that a biography can offer the historian's trade.

Notwithstanding the diversity of objects and foci, the articles that are part of *Memórias e narrativas (auto)biográficas* can be connected to each other thereby forming a 'hypertext' which is constituted in an important contribution to the field of historiography which is occupied in investigating the multiplicity of questions related to the phenomena of memory, forgetting and the production of the 'I.'

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> HEYMANN, Luciana Quillet. Indivíduo, memória e resíduo histórico: uma reflexão sobre arquivos pessoais e o caso Filinto Muller. *Estudos Históricos*, Rio de Janeiro: CPDOC/FGV, v.19, p.41, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> LEVI, Giovanni. Usos da biografia. In: FERREIRA, Marieta de Moraes; AMADO, Janaína. *Usos e abusos da história oral*. 8.ed. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 2006. p.169.

<sup>3</sup> BOURDIEU, Pierre. A ilusão biográfica. In: FERREIRA; AMADO, 2006, p.183-191.

<sup>4</sup> RICOEUR, Paul. *Tempo e narrativa*. Campinas (SP): Papyrus, 1997. t.3. p.425.

Review received in August 2010. Approved in December 2010.