

Loriga, Sabina
O pequeno x: da biografia à história

Trans. Fernando Scheibe
(*The small x: from biography to history*)

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In a work published in France under the title *Le Petit x: de la biographie à l'histoire*, which was recently translated and published in Brazil under the title *O Pequeno x: da biografia à história*, by Autêntica Publishers as part of the History and Historiography collection, the historian and professor of *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS), in Paris, Sabina Loriga revisits the historiography of the nineteenth century and presents us with a work which discusses the space given to the individual in the Century of History. Returning to the discussion about biography, already dealt with in her chapter “Biography as a problem,” published in the book organized by Jacques Revel and translated in Brazil as *Jogos de escala*, Loriga deepens and offers an analysis about the actuality of works buried in the name of a more scientific history.

Her academic production is known in Brazil, her first work translated was “The military experience,” published in the book *História dos Jovens*, organized by Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt. We can also highlight the chapter “The historian’s task,” in the book *Memórias e narrativas (auto)biográficas*; the article “The image of the historian, between erudition and imposture,” from the *Imagens na história: objetos de história cultural*; the article entitled “Being a historian today,” published in the journal *História: debates e tendências*, and two interviews: for the journal *Métis: história e cultura*, carried out by Benito Schmidt and entitled “Interview with Sabina Loriga: biographical history,” and one more recently carried out by Adriana Barreto de Souza and Fábio Henrique Lopes, Professors of Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), and available in *Revista História da Historiografia*, entitled “Interview with Sabina Loriga: biography as a problem.”

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A professional attentive to the current state of the current state of the historiographical debate, she is dedicated to understanding the challenges and the limits of historiographical work and the tasks of history in regard to epistemological and theoretical aspects, the relationship between history and biography, memory and history, and the construction of historic time. *O Pequeno x* joins the other works concerned with discussing the so-much in vogue relationship between history and biography, such as for example, the work of François Dosse, published in Brazil in 2009 under the title of *O desafio biográfico*. Although both Dosse and Loriga center their discussions on the biography-history or individual-collective relationship, the two works are distinguished principally by their focus: Loriga opts for the nineteenth century, in such a way that the French historian passes through the biographic genre in a more general manner, from the Greeks to the publication of her own work. With the objective of discussing from the theoretical point of view what it means to write a life, Dosse identifies three typologies which, although they are not watertight, permit the temporal location of different genres of biographic narratives: the heroic, modal, and hermeneutic models. According to him, the biography mode “consists in decentralizing the interest in the singularity of the trajectory recovered in order to visualize it as a representative of a broader perspective ... The individual, therefore, only has value to the extent that they illustrate the collective” (Dosse, 2009, p.195).

This moment which Dosse calls the “biographical eclipse,” located in the nineteenth century, a period in which the discipline approximates other social sciences avid for scientificity, principally Durkheimian sociology, and contributes to the disdain of historians (but not only these) towards biography. It is precisely on this period that the work of Sabina Loriga focuses. By returning to authors such as Carlyle, Humboldt, Meinecke, Burckhardt, Dilthey and Tolstoy, she swims against the current and seeks to perceive the importance of individualities in a period marked by totalizing explanations, whose concerns obscured historic subjects or even excluded narratives.

Taking the individual as a the motto of her work, although it is not restricted to discussing solely aspects referring to biography, Loriga writes a history of historiography in a period after the concussions provoked by the *linguistic turn* in History, and she is quite acidic in her criticisms of the relativisms of post-modernity. Explicitly assuming that a ‘return to order’ is not at issue, she believes that she has found in the nineteenth century heuristic works that are still useful to contemporary historians, works which Loriga analyzes from a hermeneutic perspective.

Little contextualized, sometimes launched in a vacuum, according to the vision of those less intimate with nineteenth century European historiography, these authors appear as figures who are valued in a critical interpretative analysis. Loriga gives voice to the imagination by approximating them to the current concerns of historians – they are works of their time read from a twenty-first century perspective. In addition, to the temporal transposition work of the insertion of these authors in a contemporary debate, Loriga approximates the problems currently faced in the writing of history, though not without presenting us with the limits, contradictions, and paradoxes, present in their works. However, undeniably she advocates in favor of them based on conventional sources for those who work with historiography, principally books and conference papers, sometimes crossed with letters. In this way, Loriga reads and interprets, dives into works and opens up a debate between authors in which she acts as arbiter, selecting and orienting, creating cohesion and giving meaning to the texts, tracing the positive points for the eyes of the contemporary history and elucidating projects distinct from those winners, or those crystallized as winners, who expelled individuals from the historical narratives in the nineteenth century.

Presenting these old historians as wise men, Loriga demonstrates that many critiques and concerns considered post-structuralist were already present in these authors of the nineteenth century: such as Droysen's critique of the idea of origin, shared by Tolstoy, and his assumed hermeneutic perspective, as well as the positioning about the impossibility of reconstructing the past, trumpeted by the author based on the metaphor that the juxtaposition of all the shards of a building would not recreate it. It also exposes us to Hintze's denunciations about naturalizations and Meyer's about generalizations, as well as the valorization of the subjectivity of the historian as a source of knowledge by Meinecke. The assumed positioning of Dilthey about the impossibility of pure human rationality and his analytical perspective which considered the dynamics of life, and for this reason it should not be fragmented in the writing of history, also enters on Loriga's agenda. While for Carlyle, as life was not cohesive, it was not the function of historians to attribute meaning to it.

Humboldt, in turn, gave value to the imagination of the historian, but withdrew from the fiction, which, for Loriga presupposes the duty of the historian. Loriga also analyzes Dilthey based on his assumed posture towards the relationship between the individual, the environment, and temporality, the relations established with the expectations of the future, memories, and the present. Burckhardt, the art historian, is also presented to us based on his

relationship with time, or better, with his problem with his own time. As well as the valorization of myths on the part of the Swiss author, his criticism of the idea of progress – since for him the only positive point of modernity is the historic conscience –, Loriga mobilizes fragments of Burckhardt's work which illustrate his lack of belief in a universal method for history and highlights the importance of the historian's imagination, an idea shared by Humboldt when he referred to the filling in of gaps.

In *O Pequeno x*, Tolstoy's multi-causal perspective is also valorized. Furthermore, the differences existing between reality and historic narrative, the past understood as inaccessible and the causes of phenomena unreachable by reason, the relations of the author with memory and testimony, the possibility of achieving liberty only as an interior experience and narrative strategies, allow heuristic reading of the works of Tolstoy. The lucidity of these authors, or the lucidity of the drawings created by Loriga of these intellectuals is surprising.

Starting with these authors, Sabina Loriga returns to the nineteenth century, and far from proposing an accusatory analysis against historians who excluded subjects from history, focuses on those who worked with the valorization of individualities and wrote histories close to what the author currently appreciates in historiography, above all based on the current importance acquired by biographies. Although there exists silence, focuses and sometimes an overvaluation of these works, Loriga's book allows us to question the hegemonic pretension of the explanations which exclude the individualized actions of subjects of the nineteenth century and so we can problematize the construction and valorization of a scientific memory of history. Moreover, its reading allows for a debate about current critical analyses of the scientific model of history which have proliferated in the works which discuss historiography and which exclude from their narratives approaches that avoid models looking for scientific, stable, and objective foundations for history, their principal targets.