

## COMMENT

# The Social Biography: Pitfalls and Temptations

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### Abstract

There were times – not so long ago – when it seemed that historical processes could be dissected as though human action did not matter. Those times have changed. Nowadays, scholarly biography is enjoying broad interest, also among social historians, as is shown in this issue of the *IRSH*, in which John D. French explains how biography can contribute to a better understanding of global labour history. This contribution addresses three issues. Firstly, the relationship between agency (subject) and structure, or the role of the personality in history and society; secondly, the question of charismatic leadership, and finally, the question of how to deal with issues of necessity and coincidence and with the selection of leadership.

There were times – not so long ago – when it seemed that historical processes could be dissected as though human action did not matter. Those times have changed. Nowadays, scholarly biography is enjoying broad interest, also among social historians, as is shown in this issue of *IRSH*, in which John D. French, author of a widely acclaimed study on former president of Brazil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, explains how biography can contribute to a better understanding of global labour history. He illustrates this by comparing Lula and the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) with the nineteenth-century Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and its leader August Bebel (1840–1913).<sup>1</sup>

This contribution addresses three issues. Firstly, the relationship between agency (subject) and structure or, in other words, the role of the personality in history and society. This will also include a consideration of the gender- and race-based critiques of traditional masculinist labour history.

Secondly, I turn to the question of charismatic leadership, the bond between the person being biographed (political leader) and his or her supporters. This bond's power manifests itself, among other things, in an electoral popularity that betrays a

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<sup>1</sup>John D. French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020); *idem*, “Common Men, Exceptional Politicians: What Do We Gain from an Embodied Social Biographical Approach to Leftist Leaders like Germany’s August Bebel and Brazil’s Luis Inácio Lula da Silva?”, *International Review of Social History* (2022), this issue.

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stronger sympathy for the person than for his party. The phenomenon is referred to in Brazil by the term *lulismo* and in the case of August Bebel led to testimonies of an almost religious adherence.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I will address the question of how to deal with issues of necessity and coincidence and with the selection of leadership.

### Agency and Structure

Indeed, the theme of gender, race, and ethnicity speaks to a central challenge in the historiography of working-class and left-wing parties. Blacks were not considered capable of an active, independent role until well into the twentieth century, even in the historiography that drew on traditions Perry Anderson called “Classical and Western Marxism”.<sup>3</sup> In those currents, a historical materialism was dominant from the end of the nineteenth century, with Karl Kautsky, the pope of the Socialist International, as its doctrinal inspirer, promising a transition to socialism driven linearly by the laws of capitalism. Blinded by racism and eurocentrism, the majority of socialists of the Second International at its Stuttgart congress in 1907 signally distanced themselves from any anti-colonial action.<sup>4</sup> As if there had been no Congo affair, no Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), no Aceh uprisings (1873–1914), or Java War (1825–1830), the imperialist world wallowed undisturbed in the colonial myth of immutability.<sup>5</sup> In this context, obviously, there was little room for an anti-colonial biography.

It was only in 1938 that C.L.R. James (1901–1989), a black intellectual from the West Indies (Trinidad), published the first study on the Haitian Revolution, the slave revolt under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture.<sup>6</sup> This was a modern study in which James attributed a decisive role to Louverture but, at the same time, relativized the role with the remark that “great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make, [...] limited by the necessities of their environment”.<sup>7</sup> James saw it as the task of the historian to investigate and describe these boundaries – not in a superficial “man/woman and his/her times” approach, but writing on the basis of the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between types of historical agency and modes of historical change.

This approach could take shape only when the insight dawned that there were no standard, interchangeable subjects, “persons who are nothing and do nothing but what their class, country, or ethnic group has made them”<sup>8</sup> – a recognition that, according to John D. French (in this dossier), unexpectedly but compellingly took hold after the publication in 1957 of the essay “Question de méthode” by Jean Paul Sartre. “This recognition pointed towards biography”, Perry Anderson would later explain.<sup>9</sup> In his essay, the French philosopher polemicized against Marxist

<sup>2</sup>Jürgen Schmidt, *August Bebel, Kaiser der Arbeiter. Eine Biografie* (Zürich, 2013), pp. 219–233.

<sup>3</sup>Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1978); *idem*, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London, 1983).

<sup>4</sup>Internationaler Sozialisten-kongreß zu Stuttgart, 18. bis 24. August 1907 (Berlin, 1907).

<sup>5</sup>Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 1st edn (London, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1963 [1938]).

<sup>7</sup>*Idem*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 381.

<sup>9</sup>Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 36.

literary criticism and its simplistic habit of reducing the motives of the individual to historical determinations and class positions.<sup>10</sup> He summarized the problem in an aphoristic-like critique of the disparaging image of the poet Paul Valéry that was common in communist circles: “Valéry is a petty bourgeois intellectual; there is no doubt about that. But not every petty bourgeois intellectual is Valéry.”<sup>11</sup> Sartre advocated a return to an authentic but repressed Marxism that grants relative autonomy to the individual within certain limits – a change in approach that French leaves undiscussed in this dossier. This is all the more remarkable because in the four preceding years (1952–1956) the figurehead of French existentialism had behaved like a model fellow traveller of the French Communist Party (PCF), refraining from any criticism of Stalinism and its schematic vision of the role of man in history.<sup>12</sup>

Sartre’s insight was not original. Even in its formulation it strongly resembled that of Trotsky, who wrote in 1933 on Hitler’s rise to power: “Not every exasperated petty bourgeois could have become Hitler, but a particle of Hitler is lodged in every exasperated petty bourgeois.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to Trotsky, Sigmund Freud in the same period explicitly opposed the reductionism prevalent in social-democratic and Stalinist circles. In his biographical study *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* (1937), he defended the thesis that the diversity of human life is underestimated if one recognizes only the motives of material needs and forces.<sup>14</sup> There are more impulses involved than economic ones.<sup>15</sup> After studying the work of Freud and Jung, the dissident Dutch socialist and artist Henriette Roland Holst pointed out, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, that there were “feelings (of patriotism and chauvinism) in the conscious and unconscious, in all layers of the mind”, against which, in her opinion, rational, socialist propaganda was powerless.<sup>16</sup>

In 1841, Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle published his famous *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*<sup>17</sup> – a tribute to the hero, “the soul of the whole world’s history”. C.L.R. James and Freud had no affinity whatsoever with Carlyle’s great-man’s history. Yet, because of their view that, occasionally, an individual can play a decisive role, they continued for a long time to be associated with the Scotsman, whose vision was considered characteristic of the primitive phase of historical awareness, including among adherents of the new social history that gained ground in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, this history preferred to deal with underlying

<sup>10</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique. Théorie des ensembles pratiques précédé de Questions de méthode*, tome 1 (Paris, 1985 [1960]), pp. 40–71, 52–53.

<sup>11</sup>*Idem*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup>Ian Birchell, *Sartre Against Stalinism* (New York, 2004), pp. 174. Sartre did not limit himself to a condemnation of communism. In his later years, he also formally bid farewell to Marxism, ending up with a radical neo-anarchism. See also Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup>Leon Trotsky, “What is National Socialism? (10 June 1933)”, in Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany, Introduction by Ernest Mandel* (New York, 1971), pp. 399–408.

<sup>14</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (London, 1939).

<sup>15</sup>Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York, 1988).

<sup>16</sup>Elsbeth Etty and Jan Willem Stutje, “Hendrik de Man en Henriette Roland Holst. De schande en het geweten van twee naties”, *Zacht Lawijd, Literair-historisch tijdschrift*, 14:4 (2015), pp. 25–26; Henriette Roland Holst, “Het socialistisch proletariaat en de vrede (1)”, *De Nieuwe Tijd*, XIX (1914), p. 752.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Carlyle, “On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History”, in Fritz Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, (New York, 1957), pp. 102–103.

phenomena and structures, with power and class relations, and to focus not on leadership and the figures who supposedly had the power to make history, but primarily on the role of the “masses”, their political and social organizations, and their integration into society.<sup>18</sup> These new social historians, flatly rejecting the great-man’s history, continued to express their scepticism about biography for a long time: leadership and decision-making aspects of the traditional mass movements (e.g. social-democratic and communist parties, trade unions) were much discussed but rarely studied, least of all biographically.<sup>19</sup>

Their scepticism was partly fuelled by the popular French Annales school, successively led by Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel, and by French (post-) structuralism, a current that came to the fore during the 1960s. According to a critical Braudel, the biographer was at best concerned with the “history of events” (*histoire événementielle*), a historiography in which chronology and great men were considered more important than social structures and the masses.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Braudel and his conception of general history, which was intensely humanist – general history explicitly conceived as the history of man – Marxist philosophers like Louis Althusser,<sup>21</sup> and followers like Etienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, denuded Marxist theory of its links with any traces of subjectivity, producing a kind of ahistorical and anti-humanist structuralism.<sup>22</sup> The Parisian sociologist Razmig Keucheyan characterized their philosophical outlook as “a form of historical determinism and objectivism” that emphasized the “structural invariants” constitutive of the social world.<sup>23</sup> Fearing that he made himself guilty of “economism” and “historicism”, Althusser withdrew into the realm of pure theory and, as the Belgian Marxist Ernest Mandel added in a critical review, “raised Marx’s laws of social transformation to such deterministic heights that the individual had no role to play in history”.<sup>24</sup>

Only after the 1960s did a new historiographical paradigm emerge, signalling that a younger generation felt challenged to leave “the old world” behind. They set out to create “a new man”, emblematically modelled on the figure of Ernesto Che Guevara, by far the most biographed and imagined revolutionary of the second half of the twentieth century. In those “street fighting years”, the thinking, acting, so-called Cartesian subject acquired a new status.<sup>25</sup> Social historians, with their traditional

<sup>18</sup>Jan Willem Stutje, “Historiographical and Theoretical Aspects of Weber’s Concept of Charismatic Leadership”, in Jan Willem Stutje (ed.), *Charismatic Leadership and Social Movements: The Revolutionary Power of Ordinary Men and Women*, (New York/Oxford, 2012), pp. 1–20.

<sup>19</sup>Bert Klandermans, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Oxford, 1997), p. 333.

<sup>20</sup>Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, Vol. II, (Paris, 1990 [1949]), pp. 512–520.

<sup>21</sup>Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London, [1970] 2005. (*Pour Marx*, Paris, 1965); Louis Althusser et al., *Reading Capital* (London, [1965] 2016). (*Lire le Capital*, Paris, 1965).

<sup>22</sup>For a thorough, passionate analysis of Althusser’s ahistorical structuralism, see: Edward P. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory: Or an Orrery of Errors”, in Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty and Other Essays* (London, 1978), pp. 193–399.

<sup>23</sup>Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London, 2013), pp. 44–45. Quoted in French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 380.

<sup>24</sup>Ernest Mandel, “Althusser corrige Marx”, in Denise Avenas et al., *Contre Althusser, Pour Marx* [nouvelle édition augmentée] (Paris, [1974] 1999).

<sup>25</sup>Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (London, 2018 [1968]).

preference for collective historical experiences, henceforth became interested in the individual. Perhaps the most powerful signal of this paradigm shift was the extensive debate following the publication in 1963 of Edward Thompson's formidable *The Making of the English Working Class*, which focused largely on the role of human agency in the making or unmaking of classes, and on the advent or supersession of social structures.<sup>26</sup> Already more than a decade before, he had demonstrated his scholarship with his biography of William Morris, the famous artist and utopian socialist of the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>27</sup>

The impetus of innovation did not only come from Great Britain, however. The shift was stimulated by the debates in France as well, and provoked in particular by the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), the author of, among others, *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966) and a much-praised *Histoire de la sexualité* in three volumes (1976–1984). Like Sartre, he would become something of a public intellectual, engaging openly with political struggles (May 1968, prisoners' rights) and combining commentary with direct activism. He insisted many times that the self should be an ongoing process of creation rather than a fixed identity or personality.<sup>28</sup> As he once famously remarked: "Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same."<sup>29</sup> Apart from this humanist perspective and his break with the ahistorical aspects of theory, it is essential to note that the Foucauldian notions of "self" and "subject" are paradoxical ones. They describe at once a historical and a political agent that affect history by accessing the impersonal and productive workings of power and resistance – and the effect of the operations of historical processes on these agents themselves. This willingness to engage with historical context was an obvious point of divergence from Althusser's method.

In the wake of these international and complex reactions to the changed historical circumstances of the post-war world, social biography began a new life. No longer was the autonomous, hyper-individualistic creature, living in splendid isolation outside reality, the subject, nor was the anonymous individual as a symbol or embodiment of the working class – as depicted on the iconic canvas *Il Quarto Stato* (The Fourth Estate) (Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, 1901)<sup>30</sup> – that, from a dark

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup>Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, [1955] 1977).

<sup>28</sup>One label that has been consistently attributed to Foucault, and that he just as consistently rejected, is "structuralist". In an interview held in 1983, published as "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism", Foucault claims, categorically: "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist and I have never been a structuralist". James Faubion (ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1988*, vol. II, *Aesthetics: Method and Epistemology* (New York, 1998), p. 437. In the preface to the English translation of *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes: "In France, certain half-witted 'commentators' persist in labelling me a 'structuralist'. I have been unable to get it into their tiny minds that I have used none of the methods, concepts or key terms that characterize structural analysis." (*The Order of Things* (London [etc.], [1966] 1989), p. xv. Foucault reiterated this position in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Here, again, he tried to show that he used neither the methods nor the concepts of structuralism. Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (London [etc.], 2002), pp. 199–205.

<sup>29</sup>Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup>Pellizza's painting has become a well-known symbol for progressive and socialist causes in Italy, and throughout Europe. The painting is shown during the opening credits of Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Novecento* (1900), released in 1976.

background, crosses the border into the bright, shining future in an unstoppable march. From the 1960s, biographers studied historical subjects fused in a network of social relations: against the background of the cultural traditions, political ideologies and ideas, and social and economic world they were part of. At the same time, they were conscious that these same broad social conditions also influenced their subject's world at home and at work, their cultural idiosyncrasies, and their styles of leadership.

This brings us back to Freud, who, in his essay *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, highlighted the special role of the leader and prophet but, at the same time, warned that what this individual was capable of was not determined.

### Charismatic Leadership

Freud – as well as French in his study on Lula, and in his comparative essay on Lula and Bebel in this issue – wrote about personalities blessed with unquestioned moral authority.<sup>31</sup> In contemplative asides that mark a break with the linear, birth-to-death narrative tradition, they explored what this type of leadership entailed. Max Weber borrowed the term “charisma” (meaning “gift of grace”) from religious studies when he observed a new type of leadership in politics in the late nineteenth century. That French associates this religiously charged term with Bebel and Lula is no surprise. Supporters mistook the atheist Bebel for “*unser Heiland*” (“our Saviour”), and on banners in São Paulo the names of Jesus and Lula were mentioned in the same breath.<sup>32</sup>

French rightly states that Weber emphasized the social aspect of charisma.<sup>33</sup> The “out-of-the-ordinary quality” is not an objective characteristic of the charismatic personality but is *attributed* to him by his followers, especially in circumstances of crisis or dramatic political change. It helps to explain why this type of leadership is more successful in some periods and situations than in others.<sup>34</sup> And not unimportant in this context: it contradicts the idea that these kinds of leaders have anything to do with great-man history, as if they were blessed with a “natural, instinctive, or intuitive ‘gift for leadership’”.<sup>35</sup> One often looks in vain for their names among the initiators of movements; they became involved only gradually, as the life stories of Bebel and Lula show. On Lula's inauguration in 1975 as president of São Paulo's metal workers' union, French even remarked that “his performance showed none of the decisive influence or personal magnetism that would lead observers, just a few years later, to use the word ‘charisma’”.<sup>36</sup> This quality was attributed to him only after he had led three massive strikes in the automobile industry between 1978 and 1980, under the military dictatorship.

<sup>31</sup>Outside the chronological narrative, Freud and French devote separate chapters to the charisma of their heroes. Freud, *The Man Moses*, pp. 123–128; French, *Lula*, pp. 264–294.

<sup>32</sup>French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 279. Schmidt, *August Bebel*, p. 229.

<sup>33</sup>*Idem*, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup>Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft, Grundriss der Verstehende Soziologie* (Tübingen, 1922), p. 140. Cf. Max Weber, “The Prophet”, in S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago, IL, 1968), pp. 253–267. Max Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority”, in Eisenstadt (ed.) *Max Weber*.

<sup>35</sup>French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 162.

In the vein of Max Weber, charisma, in short, can be considered an interaction, an emotional bond among co-present actors, a way to mobilize solidarity in the face of conflict<sup>37</sup> – a phenomenon that, according to the history of early social democracy, primarily manifests itself in emerging social/political movements. It is a type of leadership that runs counter to rational feeling, given that the metaphysical magnetism of an individual seems to clash with the democratic ambitions of a socialist movement based on egalitarianism, emancipation, and solidarity. Because charisma changes from context to context, and evaporates when insufficiently successful, it is also an unstable phenomenon. It is therefore important to examine the circumstances under which charisma arises, catches on, or becomes trivial. Social biography, as French's life story of Lula shows, can lead to important insights precisely because of its focus on the concrete historical individual, who not only privately but also in his militant activity undergoes an interaction with public life, with broad socio-economic structures and with political and cultural dynamics.

Less convincing, however, is the comparative perspective proposed by French, in this case the comparison between Lula and Bebel. Does insight into Bebel's leadership help sharpen our perception of Lula's? Or is the comparative view hindered too much because the two are manifestly worlds apart, chronologically and geographically? If we look only at the effects of their charisma – popularity, political success, moral authority – Bebel is certainly interesting and comparable with Lula, but if we try to penetrate the content (fabrication, intensity, duration), then examining for similarities and differences becomes difficult. It might then be more fruitful (pragmatic) to compare Lula with, for example, the Polish trade union leader Lech Walesa, or with Arthur Scargill, the leader of the British miners.

After all, charisma does not conform to a fixed, predictable taxonomy; it differs in time and place and it changes from context to context. Charisma results in a bond that is intense, emotional, and difficult to fathom. It explains why the phenomenon is often described in metaphors with religious connotations, such as “redemptive”, “blessed”, “magical”, “enchanting”, “radiant”, or “magnetizing”. And it explains why it is sometimes stretched to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish it from messianism or populism.

The metaphors, however, should not be confused with “the phenomenon” itself. In order for us to penetrate to the shared emotional feeling, charisma is best approached on the most individual level, as if it were “love”, another phenomenon that everyone knows well without being able to say exactly what it is. The German historian Thomas Welskopp wonders whether we can learn something here from the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his concept of “thick description”, which he used in his analysis of Balinese cockfights. According to Welskopp, the intensity with which the participants are drawn into the fights (“deep play”) strongly resembles the metaphorical descriptions of charismatic relationships.<sup>38</sup> To be able to describe charisma,

<sup>37</sup>Thomas Welskopp, “Incendiary Personalities: Uncommon Comments on Charisma in Social Movements”, in Stutje (ed.), *Charismatic Leadership*, p. 171.

<sup>38</sup>Clifford Geertz, “‘Deep Play’. Bemerkungen zum balinesischen Hahnenkampf”, in Clifford Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme*, 4th edn (Frankfurt, 1995), pp. 202–260. Welskopp, “Incendiary Personalities”, pp. 164–179.

we therefore have to see it at work, face to face. This requires a study at the micro level of social interaction, where the emotions that are central in the connection between the charismatic individual and his/her followers – become visible. Walesa or Scargill, contemporaries of Lula, probably lend themselves better to this approach than Bebel does.

Despite these reservations, I agree with French's pleas against an essentialist approach. The researcher should resist the temptation to conceive of charisma as a "timeless generalization that suggests a unique gift or a stable 'essence'", which can also be used in retrospect to explain the success of the charisma-endowed leader figure. French is correct to regard Lula and Bebel as "walking metamorphoses".<sup>39</sup> He is firmly opposed to telling a life story in the light of the outcome. Such backward storytelling brings us Lula or Bebel as-he-becomes-who-we-already-think-we-know. There is no room for contingency in such an approach; everything seems to be determined by fate.

### Necessity and Coincidence

If coincidence can be seen anywhere, it is above all in the role of the so-called great figures of history. A debate on the role of chance took place in the 1960s on the occasion of the publication of *The Prophet Outcast*, the third volume of Isaac Deutscher's biography of Leon Trotsky.<sup>40</sup> What if Lenin had been absent from Petersburg in 1917 – would the October Revolution have taken place? Would World War II have broken out even without Hitler? And if Churchill had not lived, would victory have been Hitler's?<sup>41</sup> These are questions that, because of their subjectivism, seem at odds with the tradition of Marxism. Identical counterfactual questions can be posed when portraying Bebel or Lula: what if Bismarck's anti-socialist laws (1878–1890) had not existed – would Bebel's pragmatism and organizational talents aimed at the survival of the SPD have been equally fruitful? The revolutionary expectations remained very popular until the early 1870s. No matter how vigorously Lula's biographers, even his least well-disposed, emphasize that fate had predestined his life, the Hungarian philosopher and literary critic Georgy Lukács correctly writes: "without chance, all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous".<sup>42</sup>

This conclusion also forms the core of an essay by the Belgian economist and historian Ernest Mandel (1923–1995), *The Role of the Individual in History: The Case of World War Two*, which appeared in the June 1986 issue of *New Left Review*.<sup>43</sup> If historical materialism places the primacy of social forces over individual action, Mandel argued, it does not deny that some individuals play an exceptional

<sup>39</sup>French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup>Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky: 1929–1940* (London/New York, 1963).

<sup>41</sup>Without Churchill, Hitler would have won the war. Sebastian Haffner made this claim in 1967 in his biography of Churchill. Sebastian Haffner, *Winston Churchill* (Reinbek, 1967).

<sup>42</sup>Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?", in Arthur D. Kahn (ed.), *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays* (New York, 1970), pp. 110–148, 112.

<sup>43</sup>Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel, a Rebel's Dream Deferred* (London, 2009), pp. 217–219. Ernest Mandel, "The Role of the Individual in History: The Case of World War Two", *New Left Review*, 157 (1986).

role – for example, by recognizing or frustrating the objective historical needs of their class more acutely than other members of their own or other classes do.<sup>44</sup> He gave the example of Hitler’s failed project of a slave economy as proof that “even the most powerful tyrant [...] cannot escape the inexorable demands of capital accumulation”. Hitler’s room for manoeuvre was limited.

Besides the relationship of individual to social class, Mandel also examined the role of collective mental structures and the process of leadership selection. The gangster mentality expressed by Hitler was already visible in November 1918; there were literally hundreds of potential Hitlers and Himmlers running around. The way in which the Third Reich rose from the collapse of the Weimar Republic was only to a limited extent determined by Hitler’s special charismatic talent as an individual politician. More important was the broad social crisis of which the Hitler type was a side effect. Hitler mastered his *modus operandi* of ruthlessness, opportunism, and deception during a selection process of more than ten years, in which he developed from *primus inter pares* to undisputed leader in the jungle of would-be Führers. With this conclusion, Mandel came close to Trotsky, who had earlier pointed out in connection with Lenin that “leaders are not accidentally created” and that “they are gradually chosen out and trained up in the course of decades” – and therefore they cannot be replaced at will.<sup>45</sup> We do not know whether French was aware of Mandel’s essay, but he was familiar with the quoted passage from Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* – a relevant observation also in relation to Lula, as French commented in the epilogue to his book.<sup>46</sup>

Those who, Mandel concluded, seek the beginnings of Hitler’s gangster mentality in his early biography rather than in the social milieu of the German Right after Versailles confuse the course of events. According to this approach, Hitler’s rise to power is interpreted as the organic unfolding of a potentially diabolical character (as in the “backward storytelling” criticized by French). Such an interpretation implies assent to the thesis that the Führer made history independent of social conditions and contradictions, a relapse into the justly criticized teleological great-men history. But Mandel also opposed the reverse line of reasoning, the sociologism in which Hitler played no independent role, in which action was an expression only of the social constellation without any room for idiosyncrasies, even psychopathic aberrations, to play a role. Mandel’s analysis was an attempt to explore the relationship between structure and agency, the dialectic of psychic infrastructure and social superstructure, in the context of war. It was a remarkable contribution to a theory of biography, a theory that we have seen exemplarily worked out in French’s *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*.

<sup>44</sup>Mandel, “The Role of the Individual in History”, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup>Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 344.

<sup>46</sup>French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 379.