

COMMENT

Pursuing the Individual in Working-Class History

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Abstract

The individual is still rare in working-class history, and, when we find them, they are often, like Bebel and Lula, exceptional. We are interested in them as leaders of vital mass movements and because they had an important impact on their societies. But another part of the promise of biographies like these is the opportunity to approach the personal dimensions of working-class experience through an individual life. Bringing the two biographies together highlights the diversity of working-class experience. Bebel developed in a racially homogeneous society while Lula was a mixed-race person shaped in race-conscious Brazil. Bebel thrived as a small-shop artisan while Lula thrived as a skilled worker in a mass production factory. I also compare and contrast these two subjects with two American labor radicals, the socialist leader Eugene Debs and William Z. Foster, a key figure in the Communist Party of the US. The importance of individual psychology and the homosocial worlds of these subjects might have played a greater role here, while the ubiquitous learning of both men raises the problem of working-class intellectual history, another subject that has not received enough attention from labor historians.

Until recently, the revolution in working-class history, which transformed the discipline between the late sixties and the early twentieth-first century, made limited room for the individual. Social history, and particularly labor history, still deals largely with the collective – the union, the socialist movement, the strike, the crowd. The influence of Marxism had something to do with these preoccupations; it was usually as part of some broader historical phenomenon that the individual worker came onto the stage. And when they did, we knew little about them. Not surprisingly, a class analysis of history seemed to require a focus on the class. There are exceptions, of course, including personal narratives, biographies, and feminist studies of working women’s personal lives. Moreover, in pursuing newer approaches to our subject, it is vital to acknowledge the transformation of the discipline occasioned by this approach. We now have a view of history “from the bottom, up”, but this does not preclude a history “from the inside, out”, a positioning of the individual within our broader narrative.¹

¹The subjective side of working-class life is pursued at greater length in the introduction and essays in James R. Barrett, *History from the Bottom Up and the Inside Out: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in Working-Class History* (Durham, NC, 2017).

John French's essay on the social biographical approach to the lives of Lula and August Bebel opens what can be a useful discussion at what may be an important moment in biographical work and its role in working-class history.

There were and are practical issues obscuring our view of the working-class individual. Bourgeois people left an archive of materials with which to reconstruct their lives – diaries, letters, and, perhaps most useful, autobiographies – what historian Mary Jo Maynes calls “the genre par excellence of the emergent bourgeoisie”.² The raw material for reconstructing most workers' lives are much harder to come by. At best, we might be able cobble together the life stories of leaders, individuals like Lula and Bebel who lived public lives. But even here the historian pursuing the subjective side of workers' lives – emotions, personal relationships, individual identity – is at a disadvantage. Socialist and communist autobiographies, for example, and, indeed, most workers' life narratives, eschewed the personal. Their concern was with the movement; the individual is as an atom in the political universe, important only in so far as they exemplified some broader aspect of working-class life, or in their roles in building the movement or party. History was driven not by the exceptional individual, but by the broader historical forces that shaped them.³

Bebel, clearly the key person in the rise of Germany's giant Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, captures this approach in his own autobiography: “[E]ven the most remarkable and influential of men is more often the thing driven than the driving power [...] Into the role of an assistant at a historical process of evolution I was thrust by the condition of my life and as a result of my experience.”⁴

Part of the attraction of biographies like these, then, is the opportunity to approach the personal dimensions of working-class life. But individuals like Lula and Bebel were, by nature, exceptional, the sort of people Maynes calls “boundary crossers”, by virtue of their public lives and their own self-reflection.⁵ Their stories can tell us a great deal about the relationship between worker leaders and the movements they helped to create. They can usually tell us less about the personal experience of workers' lives. If, as French notes, they are exceptional among leaders of social movements by virtue of their backgrounds as self-educated manual workers, they are

²Mary Jo Maynes, “Gender and Form in German and French Working-Class Autobiographies”, in Personal Narratives Group (eds), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington, IN, 1989), pp. 103–117, quote, p. 104.

³On the peculiarities of working-class autobiography and the tendency for the movement to subsume the individual worker, see George Steinmetz, “Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives in Working-Class Formation: Narrative Theory in the Social Sciences”, *Social Science History*, 16 (1992), pp. 489–516; Regina Gagnier, “Social Atoms: Working-Class Autobiography, Subjectivity, and Gender”, *Victorian Studies*, 30 (1987), pp. 335–362; Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995), p. 33; Regina Gagnier, “The Literary Standard, Working-Class Autobiography, and Gender”, in Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom (eds), *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography, and Gender* (Albany, NY, 1990), pp. 93–114; and on communist autobiographies, see James R. Barrett, “Was the Personal Political? Reading the Biography of American Communism”, *International Review of Social History*, 53:3 (2008), pp. 395–423.

⁴August Bebel, *My Life* (Chicago, IL, 1912), pp. 5–6.

⁵Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road*, quote, p. 200.

likewise exceptional among their class compatriots as charismatic, cosmopolitan leaders of mass movements. The bulk of working-class autobiography derives from such men and women and, thus, largely excludes us from the daily experience of most working-class people.⁶

Much of the history of the organized left remains fixed on the institutions, formal ideology, and, at its least helpful, on factionalism. The right sort of biography suggests an alternative path and a chance to understand the experience of radical activism. Both of these biographies help us to penetrate this world of experience beyond the institutional histories of the SPD and the Brazilian Workers Party. French argues that it is impossible to understand Lula, the Workers Party leader, without understanding Lula's personality. The crowds were first attracted to the charismatic Lula and this identification was then transferred to the party. He urges a focus on the individual in part, then, to understand the broader institutions, the movement. This is obvious in his discussion of Lula, but is the admonition more generally useful? Do historians of poor and working people need to focus more on individual experience, and, if this is desirable, how do we go about that – even in cases where we have far less to go on than the biographers of people like Lula and Bebel?

French, quoting Hobsbawm, is undoubtedly correct, then, in noting that both Bebel and Lula were exceptional in being manual workers who rose to lead mass social and political movements – exceptional, but not unique. We actually find a bit more working-class autobiography in one nation after another than we might expect, though it is certainly true that political and union activists are disproportionately represented. British labor historians have been particularly energetic in identifying and analyzing the lives of English activists, but Mary Jo Maynes and others have uncovered dozens of autobiographies of French and German worker radicals.⁷

French's biography calls to mind another leader who matches this profile: Eugene V. Debs, who led the American Socialist Party from its origins in 1900 through the 1920s. Though from a lower-middle class background, Debs, like Lula and Bebel, rose to political leadership through trade union activism and the conduct of a great strike, the Pullman strike and lockout of 1894.⁸ Like them, he spent years in prison as a result of political repression, emerging as a convinced Marxist. Very

⁶In this respect, Daniel James's book, *Dona Maria's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC, 2000), the life history of a rank-and-file Argentine Peronist meatpacking worker, is remarkable. It includes not only the everyday life of this worker based on oral history methods, but also critical essays on the significance of the story and methodological problems in doing oral history. The closest equivalent in the American context may be the personal narrative of an illiterate communist sharecropper, see Nate Shaw and Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974). On the proliferation of communist autobiographies in the United States emerging from the collaboration of Old and New Left and the problem of typical and atypical subjects, see Barrett, "Was the Personal Political?"

⁷John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1976); John Burnett, *The Annals of Labour: Autobiographies of British Working-Class people, 1820–1920*, (Bloomington, IN, 1974); *idem*, David Vincent and David Mayall (eds), *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (New York, 1984–1989); Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road*.

⁸On the Pullman railroad strike, see Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, Nick Salvatore (eds), *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics* (Urbana, IL, 1999).

much like Lula, he was a charismatic speaker who reached his proletarian audiences, in part, at least at an emotional level. After a long speech in English before the Polish Socialist Federation in Chicago, an observer asked a Polish speaker in the audience how he could understand what Debs was saying. “Debs talks with his hands, out of his heart”, the man said, “and we all understood everything he said”.⁹ Lula, it seems, achieved the same sort of emotional bond with his audiences. Speaking before huge throngs in a São Paulo soccer stadium, he was apt to burst into tears as he verbally embraced the crowd.

French’s comparison of Bebel and Lula is stimulating, but the differences between the two may be as instructive as the similarities. One might have expected the issue of race – in Brazil’s complex society and in Lula’s own mixed-race family – to be of critical importance, yet it gets little attention here or in French’s biography. French does show that part of Lula’s appeal to legions of mixed-race “peons” who left the rural north of Brazil for the burgeoning industrial city was precisely the fact that he shared their backgrounds and despised status. Likewise, on the surface, the work situations of the two subjects seem quite comparable. Both lives were turned around by apprenticeships that provided stability, relatively good wages, and, perhaps more importantly, a broader view of the world. For Bebel, this meant travel and immersion in Catholic reading and discussion groups. Lula’s excellent apprenticeship included not only immersion in the culture of the skilled metal worker, but also some study of arithmetic, technical skills, language, and history. Yet, here French glosses over the differences in work experience. Bebel made his living in a small shop, which he owned, and he lived much of his life in medium-sized German towns while Lula came of age in a large mass production factory and spent much of his life in the sprawling slums of a huge industrial city.

Raised in the slums of a huge city, a self-educated machinist toiling in a large mass production factory, immersed in the popular culture of the urban poor, Lula might have shared some experiences in terms of daily experience, though not in terms of politics, with the American communist leader William Z. Foster. Leaving school after third grade, Foster emerged as an effective speaker and a brilliant organizer and strike strategist in the early twentieth century, before descending into Stalinism and a severe personal and medical crisis in the 1930s. Like Bebel and Lula, Foster spent time in prison and faced a repressive political environment for much of the period between World War I and the 1950s. Throughout the first half of his life, Foster immersed himself in the kind of rough and tumble masculine subcultures that French emphasizes in Lula’s development. Never offered the sort of opportunities that brought a better life for Bebel and Lula, however, Foster lived the life of an itinerant worker and organizer before becoming a full-time functionary in the US Communist Party. Perhaps as a result of these differences in personality and, of course, historical context, the movements to which the two men were attracted, and which they helped to build, were fundamentally different.

While Lula and Bebel sought social transformation within the structure of electoral politics, for Foster, the experiences of unemployment, desperate poverty, and

⁹Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, IL, 1982), quote, p. 231.

dangerous work produced a stark view of the world and an unshakable embrace of revolutionary action. In his early life, he was embittered toward the system. “I early felt the iron of class struggle sink into my heart”, he wrote in his autobiography.¹⁰ The path forward for Foster was revolutionary communism, and he emerged as the leading figure in that movement. “The only possible guard for the security of the working class”, he told the House Un-American Activities Committee in December 1930, “is the dictatorship of the proletariat and the establishment of a Soviet government”.¹¹ Foster came to see himself as a key in the “militant minority” and, later, as an elite in a revolutionary vanguard at some distance from the mass of workers. Lula identified as one part of that mass. His cautiousness and his very gradual move into political activism realized itself in a broad social democratic movement aimed first at re-democratizing Brazil and then at attacking the rampant poverty in that society.

Part of the attraction of Lula’s story is precisely that he was, in many respects, unremarkable. Unlike his brother Chico, a communist union militant, he showed little interest in politics, little overt opposition to the dictatorship, and not even much interest in union activity until the seventies, in the midst of an upsurge that came from below. His turn toward political opposition came in the wake of his brother’s detention and torture by the dictatorship, but even then, his reaction was more an emotional response to his beloved brother’s oppression than a principled political opposition. He did, indeed, emerge as a charismatic leader, but only after being swept along by the late seventies strike wave and even later, by the movement to re-democratize Brazil.

In this regard, French’s decision to focus on Lula’s early family and work life and his personal relationships – rather than only his political rise and career – is useful. Beyond French’s argument that these everyday experiences actually help to explain Lula’s bonding with his base and his rise to leadership, the approach provides some notion of what life embodied for the typical Brazilian urban worker. He seeks to avoid what he terms the “lie of biography”, wherein the author deals with his subject’s early life as a prelude, only to explain his later experiences and situations. Believing that the details and experiences of Lula’s early life are vital, French takes the time to reconstruct his work and community lives, family relationships, and rough comradeship with his mates.

The symbiosis among Lula’s family’s urban migration from the north, the expansion of mass production industry, the rise of the strike movement, the emergence of the Workers Party, and the eventual re-democratization of the nation – this

¹⁰Edward P. Johanningmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton, NJ, 1994); James R. Barrett, *William Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana, IL, 2000), quote, p. 8. See also, *idem*, “Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster and the American Communist Personal Narrative”, *Labor History*, 43:4 (2002), pp. 465–482. (Reprinted in Kevin Morgan (ed.), *People of a Different Mould? Studies in Communist Biography* (Geneva, 2004), which contains a discussion of Foster’s personal life and his efforts to explain it in a series of autobiographical works.

¹¹US House of Representatives, *Investigation of Communist Propaganda: Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States*, 71st Congress, Second Session, part 1, volume 4, (Washington, D.C., 1930), p. 359.

convergence is what thrust Lula onto the center of the historical stage. He was remarkably effective in this political moment, but the most important thing about his story may well be that he was not that different from thousands of other mixed-race migrants who entered Brazil's rapidly expanding factories and cities in the sixties and seventies. His ordinary qualities represented the basis for the attraction between him and these masses.

For all their virtues, there are a number of factors missing from these books on Bebel and Lula, which might be of use to scholars pursuing the elusive worker individual. The authors might have more fully engaged French's challenge to take up interdisciplinary theory and methods by considering psychological factors for some of their subjects' reactions and behavior. Early, rather clumsy and over-stated efforts at "psycho-history" have undoubtedly discouraged more recent biographers, especially those writing from a materialist perspective, but *some* consideration of psychology and personality factors might help us to understand the individual.¹²

Not surprisingly, both Bebel's and Lula's social worlds, at work, in unions, and within their parties, were largely homosocial environments. French estimates the labor force in Sao Paulo's vehicle factories at about ninety per cent young males, and Lula's social life largely revolved around soccer and drinking with his mates. What difference did this homosocial world make in terms of his ideas? Bebel is perhaps best remembered as the author of *Women and Socialism*, a rare early effort to analyze the situation of women from a socialist perspective, including a sharp critique of marriage. First published in German in 1879, the book was translated and circulated throughout the world in the hightide of the SPD and ever since.¹³ Jürgen Schmidt probes Bebel's attitudes on the issue through extensive discussions of his relationship with his wife Julie, and he briefly considers in what sense Bebel's ideas about women's situation were themselves "gendered" (though he does not use this term).¹⁴ This is an effort outside the scope of French's perspective.

Finally, these and other working-class life stories point us toward a new form of working-class intellectual history. If we take the latter category in its broadest connotation – the history of ideas and learning, then we enter the "life of the mind" as it was experienced by blue-collar workers. Neither Bebel nor Lula had much formal education, but both were intellectually curious and avid readers. Both worked closely with Left intellectuals, Bebel with Wilhelm Liebknecht and others in the SPD leadership, Lula with the young sociologists and others at the University of São Paulo. Bebel's

¹²Cold War-era works tended to explain political radicalism largely in terms of personal neuroses and Freudian abnormalities. See, for example, Nathan Leites, *A Study of Bolshevism* (Glenco, IL, 1953), and, for a summary of these postwar psychoanalytic approaches, Gabriel Almond *et al.*, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton, NJ, 1954), pp. 183–185. Later "psycho-historians" took a similar approach. See Bruce Mazlish, *The Revolutionary Ascetic: Evolution of a Political Type* (New York, 1976); and E. Victor Wolfenstein, *The Revolutionary Personality: Lenin, Trotsky, and Gandhi* (Princeton, NJ, 1967). My point here is that it might be possible to make room for the working-class subject's personality without completely losing track of the social, economic, and political explanations for radicalism.

¹³The first American edition was August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism*, translated by Daniel DeLeon. (New York, 1904).

¹⁴Jürgen Schmidt, *August Bebel: Social Democracy and the Founding of the Labour Movement* (London, 2018).

writing life is particularly striking, not only in terms of productivity, but also in terms of the boldness of his ideas.¹⁵ These examples might encourage us to consider our subjects in all their complexities, not only as leaders of political movements.

¹⁵Tobias Frank Higbie. *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* (Urbana, IL, 2019); James R. Barrett, "Blue-Collar Cosmopolitans: Toward a History of Working-Class Sophistication in Industrial America", in: *History from the Bottom Up and the Inside Out: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in Working-Class History* (Durham, NC, 2017), 77–101.

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