

## Book Reviews

### LIFE HISTORIES IN POST COMMUNIST SOCIETIES

*Biographical research in Eastern Europe: altered lives and broken biographies.* Robin Humphrey, Robert Miller and Elena Zdravomyslova, editors, 2003. Aldershot and Burlington, UK: Ashgate; ISBN 0-7546-1657-6, 324 pp., £47.50.

This volume brings together the work of life history researchers from the UK, Western Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The joint editorship is itself testimony to the reality of east–west collaboration. Robin Humphrey is based in Newcastle, Robert Miller in Belfast and Elena Zdravomyslova in St. Petersburg. The volume is divided into four sections: a theoretical section entitled ‘The potential of biographical research’, a section that lumps together communists, informers and dissidents, a section entitled ‘Exile, migration and adapting to social change’ and a section on ethnicity and sexuality. The volume as a whole has a general introduction but the various sections do not. The introduction spells out some of Bourdieu’s basic categories such as *habitus*, capital, field and misrecognition and makes insightful suggestions as to how they might be useful in interpreting the life histories of people living in post communist societies. However, these concepts are not used in any systematic way by other contributors. The brief chapter by Roos categorizes life history research by four stages: Paradise revisited; the Fall; the Repentance and the Redemption. If we are now in the fourth stage where the reality claims of life history have been reinstated, we approach those claims in a far more cautious frame of mind after the poststructuralist assault on facts. Our ears have become more finely tuned to the nuances of text and voice.

Daniel Bertaux’s chapter on ‘The usefulness of life stories’ provides him with an opportunity to remind readers of his illustrious achievements under the pretext of finding illustrations for theoretical arguments. For example: ‘Fact: in 1981 a volume called *Biography and Society* was published, which was the first of its kind and which put life histories on the sociological agenda worldwide.’ At the same time the chapter provides a forum in which he can take a swipe at ‘narrativism’. His theoretical acumen is summed up in phrases such as ‘highly fashionable’ and ‘all but common sense’. Moreover, he claims such widely differing fellow intellectuals as Bakhtin, Giddens and Bashkar as supporting his position without engaging with their

ideas in any real sense. How a naïve realist position might or might not fit with Bourdieu's ideas is not addressed.

The life history chapters are intrinsically fascinating but they illustrate the add-on use of concepts like *habitus* where the term itself does little to advance our understanding of the lives recounted. An extreme example of this is provided by Tchouikina who analyses Soviet dissidents' activities within a framework of professional career development. This kind of sociological imperative leads her to describe the imprisonment of dissidents as a 'career break'.

Anna Rotkirch's chapter on Russian working-class autobiographies provides a good example of the kind of thickly textured accounts that only life histories can provide. Despite the failure to deliver its theoretical promise this volume will be of interest to historians, sociologists and life history researchers.

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#### COPULATORY OBSESSION AND MISSIONARY ZEAL

*The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* Catherine Millet, 2003. London: Corgi. ISBN 0-552-77172-4 (paper), 223 pp. £6.99.

Some authors choose to narrate their lives on the basis of the political campaigns they have been involved with, seeking to relate private troubles to public issues, while others move to the centre of their stories career, family, or sporting and leisure interests. Catherine Millet takes a somewhat different route: while her autobiography has been interpreted as a work of 'libertine philosophy', one would do it a disservice without saying that it was also, or at least as much as, a chronicle of her life as a voyage of fucking. The book is not about relationships, and nor is it about eroticism. To describe it simply in terms of sex, moreover, would be do injustice to the mechanical, impersonal, visceral physicality that characteristically marked her encounters with individuals, with couples, with small groups, and with numerous 'partners' in park benches, car parks, sports stadia, and at swingers' parties. This is a book that insists we take *bodily* relationships and identities into account when analysing a life.

*The Sexual Life of Catherine M* is an autobiography that recounts the seemingly countless acts of sex Catherine Millet engaged in on the basis of their relationship to 'numbers', 'space', 'confined space' and