

Workshop “The Challenges of Doing Biography”

July 3, 2015, at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies

Biography is among the most venerable and commercially successful genres of historical writing. General readers are fascinated with the life stories of major historical figures, and they also cherish the human touch of viewing history through the eyes of ordinary individuals. Although critics have frequently assailed biography for celebrating “great men” and elevating “agency” over “structure,” none of the historiographical paradigm shifts over the past fifty years – from the new social history to the various cultural turns – has seriously damaged the popularity of biographies among general and academic audiences. Historians have continued to employ biographical approaches in nearly all subfields and disciplines, while the new cultural history with its emphasis on narrative has spawned lively theoretical debates. This workshop focused on the practical challenges the participants face in their current research. It brought together scholars from Germany and the United States who are currently working on major biographical studies. Their protagonists also come from both sides of the Atlantic: African American educator and social reformer Mary McLeod Bethune, political activist Angela Davis, anthropologist Felix von Luschan, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson.

The workshop got off to a great start with a talk by Volker Depkat (University of Regensburg), who reflected on the epistemology and narratology of biography. According to Professor Depkat, the cultural turn has generated new interest in the individual without losing sight of structures. Classic biographical approaches are now complemented by experimental approaches and a more substantive theoretical debate. Yet, the question of whether biography is undertheorized remains. Professor Depkat sees biography at the intersection of scholarship, literature, and popular culture, bringing together the facts of a life, autobiography, and biographical writing. Biography turns a curriculum vitae into a story by selecting facts, setting themes, and creating plots. Biography employs both, reconstruction and construction, which is by no means a paradox. We also need to keep in mind that authors have their own autobiography. Professor Depkat finally identified three new trends in the current state of biographical writing: the “secret self” that discloses the protagonist as a truly human figure; a new take on context; and the “new biography” that is partial to a pluralization of actors and meets the poststructuralist challenge.

Andreas Daum (University of Buffalo, SUNY) then introduced his approaches of writing a biography of Alexander von Humboldt. He first pointed out that the concept of “Humboldtian science” we have today is rather fictional and was not practiced by its namesake. Therefore, writing a biography of Alexander von Humboldt is like producing a “picture without a frame.” Daum approaches his protagonist as a person of eighteenth-century civil society, as a knowledge producer, as a globalizer, and as a European. His talk also retraced some early biographies and raised the question whether writing about Humboldt’s life is best attempted as a collaborative work to do justice to his many facets.

Tracing the transfer of ideas is at the center of the biographical writing of John David Smith (University of North Carolina at Charlotte). He talked about the “making of” two of his biographies, *Black Judas: William Hannibal Thomas and The American Negro* and his forthcoming biography of Austrian anthropologist Felix von Luschan. Both projects illustrate the challenges of writing intellectual biography. While Thomas achieved notoriety with *The American Negro*, an intemperate hostile critique of African Americans, especially women, Felix von Luschan at first rejected the ideas of “scientific racism” rising in his times but later became an ardent supporter of German imperialism.

“Why write another biography of Woodrow Wilson?” was the question workshop convener Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University) posed in the first talk of the afternoon session in the light of a plethora of Wilson biographies and the fact that some scholars have even dedicated their entire academic lives to the study and celebration of Woodrow Wilson. His work in progress intends to fill an important gap – a biography of Wilson for a German audience to be published in time for the centennial of America’s entry into World War I. Between 1917 and 1919 the U.S. president became a key figure of world politics; war-weary Europeans greeted him like a messiah upon his arrival for the Paris Peace Conference. His dual failure to implement his peace program at Versailles and to persuade the U.S. Senate to ratify the League of Nations Covenant triggered an unprecedented wave of disappointment and resentment, especially among Germans. As a German historian of the United States writing for German readers, Professor Berg sees cultural translation as one of his key tasks, taking into account the unspoken normative assumptions of his readers who will hopefully recognize that the peace order of 1919 was about more than punishing and humiliating Germany.

The protagonist of Anja Schüler’s (Heidelberg Center for American Studies) biography was an eminent African American educator, activist and politician. Mary McLeod

Bethune established and presided over what would become the first fully accredited four-year college for African Americans in Florida; she advised four presidents on child welfare, education, and civil rights; she was central for the African American women's club movement; she was instrumental in forming Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet"; and she received numerous awards and honorary degrees. Yet, her life is strangely understudied, although there are many biographies about her, most of them for young readers, almost all of them anecdotal and hagiographic. Working chiefly from secondary sources, Anja Schüler's biography attempts to use Bethune's life story to illustrate some bigger points, such as the educational opportunities – or lack thereof – for African Americans in the South, the importance of the black women's club movement for the black community, and the meaning of the New Deal for African Americans. Like Manfred Berg, she has to keep the expectations and assumptions of a general audience in mind.

The workshop concluded with a talk by Sophie Lorenz (Heidelberg University). She is about to finish her doctoral dissertation on Angela Davis and the German Democratic Republic and introduced the workshop participants to one particular aspect of her work: "How using a biographical lens helps understanding Angela Davis' encounter with East Germany." The main problem she faces is opposite from that of Daum and Berg who have to take many biographies of their protagonists into account. In contrast, there is no biography of Angela Davis. Indeed, Sophie Lorenz' protagonist is very restrictive about releasing her papers or granting interviews.

Taken together, the six presentations covered a broad spectrum of problems and challenges of doing biography. All participants agreed that the format of a small one-day workshop was very conducive to fruitful and intense discussion.