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Obsah | Contents

Editorial	177
1. Studie a eseje Studies and Essays	
VOJTĚCH RIPKA A KAMIL ČINÁTL – Úvod: aktuální přístupy k výzkumu paměti (zkušenosti z fóra Dějiny ve veřejném prostoru II, 2020) <i>Introduction: Current Approaches to Memory Research (Insights from the Public History Forum II, 2020)</i>	181
MICHAL SKLENÁŘ – Nové prvky ve starém prostoru? Snahy o extenzivní přístup k římskokatolickému sakrálnímu prostoru – příklady z českého prostředí na začátku 21. století <i>New Elements in an Old Space? Attempts at an Extensive Approach to Roman Catholic Sacral Space – Examples from the Czech Environment at the Beginning of the 21st Century</i>	195
MICHAL KURZ A ČENĚK PÝCHA – České hrady a zámky: možnosti interpretace fenoménu <i>Czech Castles and Chateaux: An Alternative Interpretation of a Phenomenon</i>	227
KATEŘINA SIXTOVÁ – Babiččino údolí: krajina paměti v digitálních médiích <i>Babiččino údolí (Grandmother's Valley): A Landscape of Memory in Digital Media</i>	253
LYDIE KÁRNÍKOVÁ – Socialistická uliční jména optikou postsocialismu: případ (ne)přejmenování ostravských ulic a jeho tematizace v českém tisku po roce 1989 <i>Socialist Street Names through the Lens of Postsocialism: (non)Renaming of the Streets in Ostrava and its Coverage in the Czech Press after 1989</i>	283
2. Diskuse a rozepře Discussions and Disputes	
ONDŘEJ CRHÁK A TOMÁŠ KONEČNÝ – Strategie plagiátorské obrany. Příspěvek k debatě o etice historické práce <i>Plagiarism Defence Strategies. Contribution to the Debate on the Ethics of Historiographic Research</i>	313

3. Recenze a reflexe | Reviews and Reflections

HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (EDD.) – <i>Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography</i> (Jana Wohlmuth Markupová)	327
MATILDA GREIG – <i>Dead Men Telling Tales. Napoleonic War Veterans and the Military Memoir Industry, 1808–1914</i> (Vojtěch Kessler)	334
DAGNOSŁAW DEMSKI, DOMINIKA CZARNECKA (EDD.) – <i>Staged Otherness: Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe 1850–1939</i> (Filip Herza)	338
MARKÉTA KŘÍŽOVÁ, JITKA MALEČKOVÁ (EDD.) – <i>Central Europe and the Non-European World in the Long 19th Century</i> (Josef Řičář)	342
XOSÉ M. NÚÑEZ SEIXAS, ERIC STORM (EDD.) – <i>Regionalism and Modern Europe: Identity Construction and Movements from 1890 to the Present Day</i> (Jaroslav Ira)	349
Editorial Note	357
Upozornění redakce	360

HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (edd.),
Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical
Justification of Biography,

Leiden-Boston 2021, Brill, 276 pp.,
ISBN 978-90-04-49854-9

Biographies and biographical writing continue to enjoy great popularity among the public and they are slowly gaining favour in academia. This book tries to reflect on that by offering some of the concepts, principles, methods, and – of course – theory of such research. *Fear of Theory* is in fact the third book published as a part of the Brill *Biography Studies* series, established in 2020. I feel it is necessary to put a short disclaimer here, as I contributed to the first volume.¹ Founding the series seems only logical after the ‘biographical turn’ when biographical research made a grand comeback into the academic infrastructure with more than 60 centres devoted to it across the world.²

The first step towards the opening of the debate about biography took place in 2014, when the book *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* was published. It was the first major opportunity to bring together experts from various fields and disciplines and to reflect on the biographical approach in the 21st century. In the last seven years, though, we have noticed an epistemological shift. *Fear of Theory* does not ‘only’ want to open discussions across related disciplines; it aims much higher, “towards a new theoretical justification of biography”.

To do so, the editors of this volume, Hans Renders and David Veltman, who represent the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, decided to divide the book into three main parts: *Reflections on Theory and Biography*, *Biographers at Work*, and *Dossier on Microhistory*. The team of authors is international, which is emphasized in the opening *Foreword* written by experienced historian, Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson, President of Iceland. His close friend, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, one of the three members of the Editorial Board of the *Biography Studies* series (along with Nigel Hamilton and Lindie

1 HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (edd.), *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies*, Leiden-Boston 2020. BRILL, *Biography Studies*, <https://brill.com/display/serial/BIO?rskey=ly2BTA&result=1> (accessed on 12 December 2022).

2 UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN, *Biography Studies* (Brill), <https://www.rug.nl/research/biografie-instituut/biography-studies?lang=en> (accessed on 12 December 2022).

Koorts) wrote two studies for this book. The opening text introduces the main topics, principles, and problems discussed in the publication, for example the definition of theory and its importance, the relationship between biographical or microhistorical research and ‘grand historical narratives’, or limitations of historical sources.

Part 1: Reflections on Theory and Biography, begins with a very straightforward study by Hans Renders, which aims to address *The Deep-Rooted Fear of Theory among Biographers*. Most of the people, myself included, who have ever written a biographical work, know that the question “what is the theory of your research?” will sooner or later come, usually from the colleagues who do not exactly root for biographical research. As Renders points out, finding answers to this question may be so complicated that biographers often choose to become novelists instead since literature is subject to different rules.

Renders, nevertheless, acts as an advocate of theory in the biographical approach claiming that research in this field and biographers in general can only gain from having theoretical foundations. Theory is not a handbook, or a ‘how to do’ instruction list, it is rather an “invisible scaffold”³ which serves as a support to both the author and the book although it is yet to be found. We know the methods and as Renders consistently reminds us, “they are the same as those of a historian”,⁴ therefore, biographical research can be judged by the same principles.⁵

I find it noteworthy that when Renders, as an experienced biographer, aims to find some theoretical background, he almost automatically turns to microhistory: an approach which does not systematically use the term ‘biography’, yet it resembles it to some extent in the way it employs the ‘microscopic zoom into a micro-unit’ of its research. Microhistory is used as a means to help biographers and biographies become more theoretically aware, and more interpretative. Renders find it interesting to apply its methods in finding, for instance, the ‘turning points’ in the lives of individuals or to use microhistory in order to re-interpret ‘great historical narratives’. Along with microhistory, other potential topics arise, such as the problem of representativeness or the agency of individuals.

This position is further represented by Nigel Hamilton from UMass Boston, USA, who comments on the past absence of biography courses at universities and in academia in general, explains the roots of it, and calls for its revival. Hamilton, like Renders in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, also differentiates bi-

3 HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, Leiden-Boston 2021, p. 15.

4 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 17.

5 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 21.

ography from Life Writing. More importantly, however, he calls for searching the theory within the biographical community and authors' subjectivities and encourages taking interviews with them, asking: "Who would dare theorize the history and practice of jazz without taking into account its significant composers, vocalists and instrumentalists from their POV?"⁶

The following studies widen our contextual knowledge of selected aspects mentioned above. Jeffrey Tyssens from the Vrije Universiteit Brussels states that it is not only the lack of theory in the biographical studies, but also an "active refusal" of it,⁷ which he explains with regard to the developments in academic disciplines in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, and structuralism and post-structuralism, when biographical research existed outside of academia. The times have changed in the last 20 years and according to Tyssens, it is now "moving towards its constitution as something more of an autonomous scholarly field, a genuine *champ*."⁸ We can see this ambition in other parts of the book as well – after all, the series is called *Biography Studies*.

Kerstin Maria Pahl from the Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin takes us to another relatively new discipline, the history of emotions. The author analyses the 'wishful idea' of biographers (a wish to have access to knowing what emotions 'their' subject of research felt) and tries to find the sources and methods that could help us with that. Her reference book is James Stanfield's *An Essay on the Study and Composition of Biography*, which was published in 1813. Although Pahl is aware of the 200-year-long gap between Stanfield and us, I worry that she uses some of his terms too loosely. She fails to consider the dramatically different context of his text, for example, his claim to 'enter' the subject of the biography and to 'empathize' with him or her. After the constructivist, cultural and linguistic turn, this claim is very problematic in our day and age.

The study by Melanie Nolan from the Australian National University primarily also turns back to history. She focuses on the place of 'great individuals' or 'great men' in history reminding us of a typical aspect of biography, which is focusing on elites. Nolan builds her argumentation on the works of, for example, Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), i.e., on his works from the 19th century.

A more contemporary point of view – at least from my perspective – is the one offered by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon from the University of Iceland. He brings

6 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 39.

7 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 41.

8 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, pp. 46–47. The author of the study used the Italics.

microhistory back to the picture with his study *The Backside of the Biography: Microhistory as a Research Tool*, where he defends his signature position of ‘singularization of history’, the need to ‘break through’ the grand historical narratives. “I maintain that the ideology of general history, which is grounded primarily in the predetermined pattern of the grand narrative, has lost its way.”⁹ Magnússon uses examples from selected microhistorical books, which support his statement and show how a different perspective – outside of the box of the grand narratives – can change our understanding of researched topics, individuals, etc.

The following *Part 2: Biographers at Work* offers a remarkable look into various types of biographical (or microhistorical) research, varying in regions or professions of their subjects as well as the stages in which they find themselves. Eric Palmen, the chief editor of biografieportaal.nl in the Netherlands, further develops the theses of Hans Renders and Nigel Hamilton and shows a potential of biography to serve as a ‘corrective’, which he demonstrates on specific examples.

Thanks to the international team of authors, we may as well look into some regional specifics. Palmen talks about Janus van Domburg and the Dutch concept of pillarization, which may have had a significant influence on people’s lives in the Netherlands (pillarization plays an important role in the last study of this book written also by Hans Renders). David Veltman writes about Felix de Boeck, Dutch avant-garde painter, whose public image may be quite inaccurate, as the research shows. David Roth takes us to Australia, where he completed his microhistorical research on the mentally ill. He asked to what degree the selected cases were ‘typical’ or ‘extraordinary’ and what it says about the Australian social and health care system. Carl Rollyson from The City University of New York writes about his research on William Faulkner and tries to propose how it differs from the previous ones. Emma McEwin from Australia looks deeper into Virginia Woolf’s understanding of biographical research.

Hans Renders emphasizes the problematics of ethics in biographical research.¹⁰ In another study in this book, he proposes a ‘template’ for biography and states the following: “Biography, as a form of microhistory, would seem to be an ideal method for undertaking this [life of Theo van Doesburg] research.”¹¹ This unexpected epistemological statement (“as a form of microhistory”) opens the door to the final, third part called *Dossier on Microhistory*.

9 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 90.

10 HANS RENDERS, *How close can a biographer get to his subject?*, in: *Fear of Theory*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden-Boston 2021, p. 121.

11 H. RENDERS, *How close can a biographer get to his subject?*, p. 156.

Part 3 contains primarily works by Hans Renders, David Veltman, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, and István M. Szijártó from the Eötvös University in Budapest, Hungary. Personally, I find this part the most interesting because although it contains the fewest studies, it is very well interconnected, which allows the readers to read it not only as individual texts but also almost as a discussion. The reason is obvious: two main authors, Magnússon and Szijártó, have co-published a book called *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* in 2013 and now we learn that they largely disagree on the essential role of microhistory.

Their studies are written as a polemics about the key question of microhistory: should a microhistorian attempt to put the main actor(s) of the research into a larger context (Szijártó), or should he 'singularize' his micro-unit and examine it as deeply as possible (Magnússon)? In other words, Magnússon suggests that with wide contextualization a microhistorian loses the focus on one's own subject and as a result, wastes the biggest potential that microhistory has. This leads to problematizing grand narratives and not adding more to them. Szijártó, on the other hand, does not see contextualization as a problem but rather as a way to make microhistorical research conclusions more valuable for the general historiography, national history, and the public. Although this dispute does not seem to reach a satisfactory conclusion anytime soon, I believe that it is impressive to see two scholars not agree with each other but still find a way to have a critical, yet friendly discussion.

But the reason why I found this part the most appealing is different. What strikes me the most is that the final part of the book called *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography* is not essentially about biography. At first sight, it analyses microhistorical approaches and one could ask why it is included here at all. But as you read the opening study and commentary by David Veltman and Hans Renders again you realize that they do not perceive microhistory as merely interesting theoretical inspiration. They go further to say: after the first wave of microhistory (Ginzburg, Poni) and the second wave (Peltonen, Revel) we are now in the third wave of microhistory which is characterized by a close connection with the biographical approach to historical research.¹² Renders and Veltman claim, that "[...] by studying individual perspective, something new can be said about general issues as well. The biographer then problematizes the way individuals are seen as representatives of a larger

12 This motive was present already in the previous book, but now it is stated more explicitly. HANS RENDERS, BINNE DE HAAN (edd.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Leiden-Boston 2014, pp. 5–6.

whole. This what we would call the third wave in microhistory. Modern biographers should not seek confirmation of the representativeness of the person under scrutiny. Instead, they are capable to show discrepancies in the agency of the individual between a micro- and a macro- level.”¹³ The close relationship between biographical and microhistorical research is then ‘officially pronounced’ when microhistory is regarded as a method of biographical research, a hermeneutical device, “[...] allowing us to interpret historical sources in a new way.”¹⁴

This strong statement may not be widely accepted, and even Magnússon would not separate the so-called third wave from the older approaches so vehemently.¹⁵ Yet, the main argument remains: even if we do not agree with Renders and Velzman and do not find the relationship between biographical and microhistorical research so unchallenging and beneficial for both sides, this book means a huge effort of both authors to find common ground and it proves to be an important attempt to find theoretical background for biographical research.

The studies in the book vary from very passionate, straightforward, and theory-focused to less ambitious ones, finding a proverbial ‘safe space’ in the works of older authors of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. Thanks to that, however, the book offers a wide range of approaches and researched topics. I must add that the only missing piece of the puzzle in the otherwise comprehensive study of contemporary historical research methods is the potential of oral history, which, since its beginnings, has shared much in common with microhistory. The interviews – usually of a journalistic, not oral history nature – are mentioned in the book but more space is given to other methods. This is understandable since the authors are not practicing oral historians, but I believe – as biased as I may be – that this could also be a fruitful collaboration.

After reading this book, I could not help but wonder why the connection between biography and microhistory was not established much earlier and why is it happening now. I think we must go back to the beginning and remember that it has not been that long since “biographical research as such made a grand comeback into the academic infrastructure”. For a long time, microhistory and biography developed separately: microhistory as a new historiographic approach and biography as a popular writing genre outside academia. With the return to its academic roots, it is only logical that biography needs to find theoretical and

13 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 192.

14 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 193.

15 H. RENDERS, D. VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of Theory*, p. 203.

epistemological ‘allies’ and even though it is not an easy task, I praise this book for initiating it.

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