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WPSA 2019

Author's Note: *This paper is an excerpt from the book manuscript that I am currently working on. Specifically, it is the introductory chapter. Thus, it gestures towards arguments and ideas that I only fully elaborate elsewhere. I apologize for any difficulties this may cause for the reader. Nonetheless, my hope is that this paper offers a clear, concise overview of my thesis and argument.*

Acts of Identity: A Political Theory of Biography – Introduction

Identity politics has become an inescapable aspect of our contemporary political landscape. The term, until recently a reliable referent to the various social justice struggles of the New Left, has become ambivalent, referring as often today to the resurgence of right-wing white nationalism. This new ambivalence has revealed a dismal irony, an “identity crisis,” if you will pardon the pun: with seeming ease, the call for liberation has been retooled as a vehicle of reactionary resentment. No longer do the aggrieved identity claims of minority groups stand out against the “invisibility” of whiteness as an implicit social and normative standard. Whiteness is certainly visible today and those who identify strongly as white are now making the same kinds of aggrieved identity claims. This dilemma will not be solved by insisting on the false equivalence of these two groups of claims. The ambivalence of contemporary identity politics compels us to retrace the roots of our identities.

The dilemma facing identity politics was not inevitable, but neither was it unforeseeable. To the contrary, it points to an aspect of identity politics’ repertoire that has long caused concern. As early as 1993, Wendy Brown, in a Nietzschean critique of leftist identity politics, warned that there was an undercurrent of reactionary *ressentiment* in purportedly progressive identity claims. Then, in his influential book from 2003, *Bound by Recognition*, Patchen Markell took on the claims of communitarians and multiculturalists, cautioning against the demand for recognition. In his

critique, he argued that the sovereign self is a myth; that in reality we are fragile and finite beings. Combined, the work of Brown and Markell argues against the impulse to essentialize our identities.

Though influential thinkers, their critiques have not quite caught on within political theory. Even the most “reconstructed” liberal thought presumes the presence of a core self (Krause 2015). While Sharon Krause concedes that, as political actors, we are non-sovereign, she nonetheless insists non-sovereignty is compatible with the idea of an underlying, consistent, essential identity. Against the “new materialism” of thinkers such as Jane Bennett and Davide Panagia, she argues that action implies an agent – an affective account of sub-individual sensitivities does not suffice. This sounds reasonable, but the formula could just as easily be reversed: an agent implies action. Thus, we are left with the proverbial chicken-and-egg question. Or, as Nietzsche suggested, perhaps it is wrong to separate the doer and the deed just as it is to separate lightning from its flash.

How can we resolve this conundrum and sort out the relation between identity and politics? What resources does political theory provide for us to think through these contemporary problems? In this book, I will draw on a relatively unexamined yet resonant aspect of this textual tradition: biography.

Political theory addresses questions of public concern. What is justice? What is freedom? Under what conditions may the exercise of power be considered legitimate and incur the obligation to obey? Given this, we are presented with a puzzle: why have so many political theorists shown interest in the genre of biography, which would seem to be such a personal and apolitical literary form? From Plato’s episodic accounts of the life of Socrates to Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, political theory has often, and paradoxically, fixed its focus on the life of a single person.

The answer to this puzzle, I think, is that biography reveals the connection between individual identity and political action. It connects the “who” and the “what” of politics. More

pointedly, it reveals that who we are is determined by what we do. This is evident from its form: the basis for a biographic plot is the course of action that an individual has taken through life. Through recounting an individual's course of action, a biography reveals to us who that individual is.

It might sound straightforward, but this formulation of the relation between identity and action is at odds with our modern commonsense understanding of what it means to be a "self." One of the defining features of the modern age in which we live is its subjectivism. On this, the genealogists of modernity can agree, whether they call it "emotivism" (MacIntyre 2007), "inwardness" (Taylor 1989), or bald "self-assertion" (Blumenberg 1983). One aspect of this inward turn is what J.B. Schneewind calls "the invention of autonomy" (Schneewind 1998). Autonomy is the notion that our outward acts are authorized by our inward selves. Thus, in this model, individual identity – the consistency of the self with itself – is the source of action, not the result.

The "invention of autonomy" has had an enormous impact on modern political thought. Liberalism, republicanism, and even critical schools of thought like Marxism and existentialism have posited autonomy, whether taken in an individual or collective sense, as a normative ideal. In liberalism, with its values of individual freedom and independence; republicanism, with its veneration of popular sovereignty; Marxism, with its goal of transforming the proletariat from a class "in itself" to a class "for itself;" and existentialism, with its anxious quest for authenticity, political action has been conceived as the self-expression of a determinate subject. In these models, political action is "correct" when it is an accurate and authentic reflection of the acting subject.

What I wish to argue, in this study of biography, is that things are the other way around. What we do is not a reflection of who we are. Instead, who we are is a reflection of what we do.

We become who we are through what we do, and we have no identity until we have a story. In political terms, this means that we do not carry our private selves, already fully formed, over into politics. Our identity is formed, not in our own private thoughts, but through our role in public life.

This thesis is at odds with current identity politics just as it is with the ideal of autonomy. In contemporary political life, identity is often conceived in terms of categorization and labeling: an individual is identified with a particular class, race, sex, gender, religion, nationality, etc. However, while these labels may or may not accurately categorize “what” a person is, they do not tell us “who” a person is. To understand “who” someone is, we need to know their life story. We are more than the sum of our parts or a cross-tabulation of our characteristics. What animates us, what brings us to life and encapsulates our singularity, is the course of action that we take through life.

This thesis leads us to consider some uncanny and unorthodox ideas about our identities. First, when we reject the idea that we are autonomous actors, we have to give up the idea that we are the “authors” of our own lives. In other words, the study of biography teaches us that autobiography is an impossible aspiration. No one is the master of their own destiny. There is a simple reason for this: no one can predict all of the consequences of their actions, or how others will react. As actors, we share the stage with others, and this means that our actions are interactive; that what we do, and what happens as a result, is contingent upon how those around us choose to act. Because we cannot predict the outcomes of our actions, it is not until after the fact that we come to recognize what we have done and who we have become. Our actions write our story for us, of their own accord, without regard for who we might imagine ourselves or wish ourselves to be.

Second, this thesis defies our commonsense conceptions of shared identity and solidarity. From a biographic standpoint, our identity is utterly individual: it is our singular course of action. This singular course of action sets us apart from all others, no matter how alike, as an individual. Biography teaches us to distinguish this individuality – “who” we are – from “what” we are; from all the various categories and labels by which we associate or are associated with others as a group. This might sound problematic, or even like political suicide, especially for members of persecuted groups. Where is there room for solidarity, if we are to insist that each individual has their own fate? However, the biographic perspective is perfectly capable of perceiving the reality of linked fate, and moreover in a way that transcends any exclusive or essentialist notions of “groupness.” In short, the biographic perspective teaches us, as discussed above, that what we do makes us who are, and that what we do takes place in a context of interaction with other human beings. That is to say, who we are is a product of our relations with others, and our own fate is linked with others’.

Third, this thesis suggests to us a particular conception of democracy that is premised upon the singularity and equality of actors rather than ideas of collective action or popular sovereignty. A biographic perspective acknowledges each individual as an actor, since it is their acts that distinguish them. Politics is seen as the contingent aggregate of individual actions rather than the expression of an authorial will. Democracy, in this picture, is less an expression of a substantial “we” than it is the notion that all individuals are equal political actors in a process of interaction. This does not mean that all actions have equal weight, but simply that all individuals are equal as actors.

Thus, in this political-theoretical study of biography, I will emphasize these three points: (1) that identity is shaped by action, or, in other words, that what we do makes us into who we are; (2) that action is an external process of interaction with other actors rather than the self-expression of one’s autonomous inner self; (3) what makes democracy a possibility is not some kind of

collective consciousness or popular will but instead the equality of individuals as political agents. In short, biography offers political theory valuable insight into the relation between identity and action while touching upon questions of individuality, autonomy, solidarity, democracy, and equality.

Biography, Autobiography, and Political Theory

Biography and political theory have a long history, dating back at least as far as Plato. Plato's dialogues, such as *Crito* and the *Apology*, present philosophical and ethical questions through scenes from the life of Socrates (Plato 1997). His life is presented as worthy of imitation in terms of philosophical method as well as ethical conduct. Plutarch's *Lives*, in a less philosophical vein, offers the lives of famous Greek and Roman heroes as exemplars of virtuous or vicious conduct (Plutarch 2001). Meanwhile, Xenophon's *The Education of Cyrus* (Xenophon 2001), a biography of sorts of Cyrus the Great, is an early precursor to the medieval "mirrors for princes" genre, in which one may include Machiavelli's *The Prince*, with its infamous biographical sketches of Cesare Borgia, Agathocles, and other controversial historical figures (Machiavelli 1998).

What these Ancient and Renaissance sources have in common is the idea that biography is the portrayal of an exemplary actor, whether their actions are to be admired and imitated or hated and avoided. The moral qualities or the virtues and vices of an individual are determined by what they do and how they respond to circumstances. These choices form their character and decide their fate. The point of biography is to teach the reader which actions are to be praised and which blamed.

In modern political thought, however, biography has been largely supplanted by its offshoot, autobiography. With autobiography, the focus is not so much on an individual's actions as on their inner life: their intimate, otherwise unknowable feelings, thoughts, and passions. We

may take Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the founding father of this genre, and his famous *Confessions* as its defining classic (Rousseau 1953). Though the title of this book evokes the spiritual diaries of Saint Augustine (Augustine 1992), Rousseau's purpose is not spiritual but secular: he is not on a quest to find God within himself, but rather to relate to his readers the intimate secrets of his own life.

In doing so, Rousseau revolutionizes the relation between action and identity. A notoriously unreliable narrator of his own life story, he justifies the errors, omissions, and misremembrances of his *Confessions* as an authentic portrayal of his soul, if not the actual events. He portrays himself as a beautiful soul, mistreated and misunderstood by a cruel world. With this move, he claims a privileged authority over his life story and a special knowledge of his own identity that the mere events of his life could not reveal to the casual observer. In this way, Rousseau asserts authorship of his own life story, basing it on his sentiments rather than his actions.

While these intimate writings might seem removed from Rousseau's political writings, scholars have noted the political significance of his *Confessions* and its influence. Margaret Ogrodnick describes the book as an "affirmation of intimate life," of "authenticity," and of "self-creation" (1999), and Christopher Kelly calls the book a "moral fable" and Rousseau an exemplar of virtue (1987). Indeed, autobiography's emphasis on authenticity and self-expression have made it a vital form of expression for a range of modern political thinkers, from liberal individualists like John Stuart Mill (1960) to existentialists like Friedrich Nietzsche (1992) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964). It has been especially important for African-American thought, from the classic slave narratives (Gates, Jr., ed. 1987) to W.E.B. DuBois (1982; 1984; 1999; 2007) to Malcolm X (1989), as well as postcolonial thought (Fanon 2008; Memmi 1991; 1992). These uses of autobiography speak to its emancipatory promise and its affirmation of the self over and against the injustices of society.

Compared with this list of autobiographic classics, there has been a dearth of strictly biographic political thought in modern times. The most significant exception to this rule – and the inspiration for this project – is the work of Hannah Arendt. In addition to her philosophical reflections in *The Human Condition*, where she argues that biography is the “specifically human” form of life (Arendt 1998, 97), she wrote several biographies, including *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Arendt 1997), *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt 1968), and her extended profile of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2006). In these works, Arendt shows how identities are formed via engagement (or failure to engage) with the world. Individuals are actors in a stage-play, and how they act determines who they come to be. What makes the stage-play of real life distinct from (and stranger than) fiction, however, is that there is no director, and no one, least of all any one of the actors, is the author of its unfolding plot. This implies that autobiography – being the author of one’s own life – is an impossible task, an “absurd exercise” (Cavarero 2000, 24).

From Arendt’s point of view, autobiography is impossible for a few straightforward reasons. First of all, it confuses the role of actor and spectator. Biographic subjects are not reliable witnesses of their own lives because they are too busy living it. We cannot see ourselves from the outside. Third-person spectators are in a much better position to witness – and judge – what we do. Second, and related, our ability to narrate our own lives is limited by two incontrovertible facts: we cannot precede our own birth or outlive our own death. Therefore, we can never tell the whole story. Someone else – a third party – is the only one able to tell the tale from beginning to end.

Beyond these reasons, however, Arendt notes a more serious problem with autobiography: it engenders an identity crisis. This crisis is in some sense the cautionary “lesson” of her biography of Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), a German-Jewish salonnière from post-Enlightenment Berlin.

As a young woman, Varnhagen sought to escape her Jewish heritage through the cultivation of her inner self, inspired by Romanticism and in particular Rousseau's *Confessions*. In effect, this amounted to a denial and a retreat from reality in favor of the inner world of her thoughts and dreams. "Facts mean nothing at all to me," she wrote in a letter signed "Confessions de J.J. Rahel" (Arendt 1997, 91). In Arendt's telling of her life story, what "saves" Varnhagen is her mature realization that the reality of her circumstances defined her identity after all. It is this realization that awoke Varnhagen to the fact that, like everyone else, she was an actor, identified by her acts.

In this study, I follow Arendt in her vindication of biography and critique of autobiography. In doing so, I aim to emphasize that what we do makes us who we are, and not vice versa. We are not the authors of our own lives; our life stories are written by the course of action that we take in life. This course is ultimately unpredictable and is not primarily self-driven but rather interactive. As in Arendt, this critique of autobiography is connected to a larger political point: we, whether as individuals or a collective, are non-sovereign; we are not the autonomous masters of our actions. Politics is driven onward, not in accordance with anyone's will, but by an open-ended action-process.

Thus, biography, understood in an Arendtian vein, teaches us a number of valuable political lessons. First, it teaches us that identity is the result, not the source, of action. What we do makes us who we are. This lesson frees us from the trap of thinking that certain categories of people must act in certain ways, and generally makes it possible to consider individuals in a more open-ended way. Second, it teaches us that we are non-sovereign, that the effects of our action lie beyond our control. The point is not to divest individuals or groups from responsibility. The point is, third, that action is an interactive process, a contest of wills, rather than the expression of anyone's will. Thus, we should temper our expectations regarding our ability to "direct," "manage," or "control" political life. Lastly, biography teaches us that we cannot separate ourselves from this messy

process. We become who we are through interaction. In isolation from this process, we are nobody.

Additionally, a biographic perspective shifts the burden from the biographic subject to the spectator. The onus is no longer on the biographic subject to “prove” their humanity to others or to “confess” the secrets of their innermost self. Instead, it is imperative that we learn to see each other as actors; that we acknowledge each individual, no matter how marginal, as a political agent.

Thinking with and against Arendt

As stated above, this study was inspired by Hannah Arendt’s writings on and of biography. In my reading of these works and her thought generally, I am closely aligned with Patchen Markell. In *Bound by Recognition* (2003), he argues that we should temper our demand for recognition, in which we presume that we are the sovereign masters of ourselves, and acknowledge the fact that we are fragile and finite creatures whose intentions and actions are often met with surprise. Running through his book is a reconceptualization of the relation between identity and action in which action comes first and identity only afterward. In this tragic, “Sophoclean” notion of the self, Markell’s work is closer to Alisdair MacIntyre’s (2007) or Bernard Williams’ (2008) than mainstream liberal political thought. It is also consonant with the argument that I am undertaking here.

However, I should emphasize that this is a study of life, and how it takes shape, not death. Although our mortality teaches us the sober lesson that we are not the authors of our own lives, my focus is on vitality, and specifically our capacity for action. Thus, while I believe there is an affinity between my work and tragic conceptions of the self, I distance myself from work, such as Judith Butler’s (2000; 2004; 2016), that emphasizes grief and death. Instead, I find myself closer to Bonnie Honig’s work on tragedy (2009; 2010; 2011; 2013), which proposes the promising idea of an “agonistic humanism.” This version of humanism, like Butler’s “mortal humanism,”

emphasizes human finitude, but in a different sense. It is not the fact that we all die that is important, but the fact that we are all agonistic participants in political struggle. It is that we are all caught in the fray, so to speak, that reminds us that we are but human beings. Honig's "agonistic humanism" accords well with this study, although I'll have more to say about humanism in a moment.

But first, this study is not about the genre of tragedy and its political significance. Nor is it about Arendt's penchant for "storytelling" more generally, which is well documented (Benhabib 1990; Curthoys 2002; Disch 1993; Herzog 2000; 2002; Kateb 2002; Leibovici 2007; Luban 1983; Melaney 2006; Speight 2011; Wilkinson 2004; Young-Bruehl 1977). It is about biography, specifically, as an elementary and essential form of political thinking. Aside from Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000) and Julia Kristeva's *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative* (2001), there has been very little emphasis on this particular point. However, in my view, it is a necessary point to make: for Arendt, biography reveals who actors are and the meaning of what they have done. Thus, it is essential for the comprehension of political action. Furthermore, for her, life stories are the strands out of which the fabric of history is woven. There is no "process" or "logic" to history over and above the weaving-together of our life stories.

On this point, as with others that I have discussed above, I must state I agree with Arendt. However, my agreement is not unqualified, and this study is not simply a vindication of her ideas. I disagree with her on several specific but significant points, and to work out these disagreements I enlist the aid of a number of theorists with insights to contribute on the question of biography. These theorists are Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Rancière, and the issues on which they intercede regard humanity, methodology, and democracy, respectively. Below I will briefly outline how I engage with each thinker in order to productively resolve my differences with Arendt.

The first difficulty with Arendt's thought is her conception of what it means to be human. "The chief characteristic of this specifically human life," she writes, "is that it is full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography" (Arendt 1998, 97). That is to say, in other words, that our life story does not only determine who we are, it is what makes us *human*. Thus, for Arendt, our humanity is bound to our identity, and both depend on our capacity for action. This is a problematic equation that threatens the anonymous and the passive with dehumanization. While I heed Patchen Markell's point that the distinctions between Arendt's categories are fluid (2011), and I certainly acknowledge that for Arendt there is more to human life than taking action, it still seems to me to be the case that for her an anonymous, passive life would not be fully human.

To grapple with this problem, I turn to Giorgio Agamben. Though his work is in many ways indebted to Arendt, his conception of humanity as "potentiality" is practically opposite to hers. If Arendt requires human beings to "actualize" or "realize" themselves by taking action, Agamben argues to the contrary that our humanity lies in our potentiality as such. For him, it does not matter if we realize our potential because it is our very potential in itself that makes us human. For Agamben, human beings are human regardless of how they live or what they amount to in life.

In the end, Agamben's disavowal of human actuality leads him to disavow identity, too. If we are not to be identified with what we actually do but rather with what we could do, then we are not to be identified with who we are but rather with who we could be. As Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda put it, for Agamben it "is a matter of living the life that we live as if we were *not* living the specific set of events that compose our biography" (Chiesa and Ruda 2011, 172). By urging us to embrace our potentiality, Agamben asks us to disavow our actions and give up being who we are.

Agamben's disagreement with Arendt is productive but problematic. His idea of humanity as potentiality is an important advance. No longer is it incumbent upon individuals to "prove"

their humanity by distinguishing themselves through action and making a name for themselves. Agamben is right to insist that humans are human regardless of what they do or who they are. However, in making this point, he goes too far, as if to argue that action and identity do not matter.

The solution to this impasse, I argue, is to disentangle our humanity from our identity. Human is “what” we are, not “who” we are; just as identity is “who” we are, not “what” we are. Furthermore, I would add that action does not make us human, but it does make us who we are. Agamben himself demonstrates this latter point, albeit negatively: his argument that we are not defined by what we do leads him directly to the claim that we cannot be identified by who we are. However, I do not agree with Agamben that we need to sacrifice our identity to save our humanity, just as I do not agree with Arendt that we need to rise above anonymity in order to become human. I think we should separate the question of what makes us human from what makes us who we are.

The second significant doubt I have with Arendt’s work is her phenomenological method. The distinctions that she makes – for instance, between the activities of labor, work, and action – are rooted in a particular kind of “phenomenological humanism” (Hinchman and Hinchman 1984). This phenomenology posits that human life is conditioned by certain essential forms of experience. These basic experiences determine the limits of how we can live our lives and what we can know. But the trouble is, if our only access to these essential forms of experience is through our concepts, how can we be confident that these experiences determine our concepts and not vice versa? Indeed, how could it be possible to have a “pure” experience of the world unmediated by concepts? While these doubts might seem secondary to those voiced above about our humanity and identity, the solution I proposed to that problem makes it necessary to turn our attention to these concerns. If we can no longer appeal to human nature in our attempt to understand how we become who we are, then we need to adopt a method of inquiry that is agnostic about the question of human nature.

Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical method is an excellent candidate in this respect. With this method, Foucault intended "to free history from the grip of phenomenology" (2010, 203). Against phenomenology, he argued that we have no immediate, pre-conceptual experience of reality because our experience is filtered by the knowledge we have. We can only experience what we know, and what we know is determined by the limits of our discourse. "Archaeology," in Foucault's usage, is the historical study of the development of discourse, with special attention paid to the ways in which different discourses make different forms of knowledge possible. "Genealogy" supplements this archaeological account by pointing to the power relations that influence the development of discourse. That is to say, for Foucault, knowledge is political, not neutral, and the contours of our experience are shaped and determined by the terms of this struggle.

From this perspective, the genre of biography is considerably more complex and open-ended than it is in Arendt's account. For Arendt, biography is more or less a transcription of what "really" happened: it is a linear account of the course of action that an individual took through life. There may be different perspectives on these events, but their underlying reality is never in doubt. But for Foucault, there is no such assurance. The biographic subject is an artifact of discourse. What someone did, and consequently who they are, is a question determined in discursive terms. Thus, two different discourses, with a different set of concepts, may identify an individual differently. Identity, then, becomes a complex and open-ended product of the politics of discourse.

Let me provide some practical examples of what I mean, taken from Foucault's own work. In the 1970s, Foucault edited two "dossiers" of archival material, the first entitled *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother ...: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century* and the other *Herculine Barbin; Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. They have a similar structure: both juxtapose the autobiographic

writings of their titular subjects with documents written by the legal, medical, and psychiatric authorities who administered their cases. What is interesting about this juxtaposition is that the way these individuals identify themselves contradicts how they are identified by the experts. Pierre Rivière insists that he is sane, contrary to the findings of the psychiatrists; and Herculine Barbin, raised as a girl in a convent but compelled to change h/er legal status to that of a man after a medical examination in early adulthood, claims to be neither male nor female. Nonetheless, the point is not that Rivière or Barbin “speak truth to power,” but that they provide a counter-discourse to the official one. Foucault does not see it as a contest between lived experience and abstract knowledge; he sees it as a contest between two discourses. Identification is revealed as a political act.

Thus, Foucault’s biographical dossiers of these “obscure and ill-fated” individuals teaches us the lesson that biographizing itself is a political act insofar as it challenges hegemonic discourse. For instance, biographies that recount the life stories of marginalized and neglected figures might persuade us to consider them as political actors and thus, in a sense, as equals, for the first time. This suggests a powerful role for biography in democratic theory: shedding light on unsung actors.

This brings me to the last difficulty with Arendt: there is a democratic deficit in her thought. Her conviction that “every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story” is undercut by her distinctions between the activities of labor, work, and action (Arendt 1998, 184). Paradoxically, this can be seen in her admiration of the labor movement: “when the labor movement appeared on the public scene, it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke *qua* men – and not *qua* members of society” (ibid., 219). On the one hand, Arendt shows no elitism: anyone at all, regardless of their qualifications or status, can engage in political action. On the other hand, she is dismissive of everyone else, whether bourgeois or proletariat, who exist

merely as social creatures. Those who simply “work for a living” fail to distinguish themselves. Those who stick to their social roles seem to her to be mere drones with no life story of their own.

To work against this tendency in Arendt’s thought, I engage with Jacques Rancière’s work. He has critiqued Arendt on similar grounds in several essays (Rancière 2010, 27-75, 205-218). Indeed, he has gone so far as to say that his own political manifesto, “Ten Theses on Politics,” was written “as a critique of the Arendtian idea of a specific political sphere and a political way of life” (Bowman and Stamp, eds., 2011, 3). Rancière is committed to the idea that a democratic politics of equality can surface anywhere and anytime in a society and disrupt its hierarchical forms and norms.

Parallel to these polemics, Rancière has formed his own theory of biography as democracy. In his essay, “The Historian, Literature and the Genre of Biography,” he argues that “[t]he division between two kinds of ‘life’ has to be overruled” (Rancière, 2011, 174). This is the division between the active, glorious lives of the great and the passive, humdrum lives of the ordinary. To be on the former side of this divide is to be worthy of memory and biography; to live life on the latter side is to be consigned to oblivion. To overrule this divide, Rancière argues that we must rethink the traditional, Aristotelian idea of action that serves as the template for the biographic plot.

In doing so, Rancière takes his cues from modern literature. He argues that modern literature has flattened the classical hierarchy of representation, thus leaving all literary subjects equal. For instance, in Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, the provincial, banal characters of the story share space with detailed descriptions of equally banal, everyday scenes and objects (Flaubert 2011). Irrespective of Flaubert’s own political views, his novel’s aesthetic is democratic in its effects.

Rancière pairs the democratic aesthetic of literature with an innovative account of action: “literarity.” Samuel Chambers, first in an article and then in a book, has emphasized the centrality of this idea to Rancière’s political thought (Chambers 2005; 2013). In brief, it refers to the free circulation of words between human beings. In Rancière’s view, we do not “possess” language. Instead, language is a medium through which we relate to each other, and words circulate in that medium. However, this circulation is typically policed: in any given social order, there are norms that delimit what may be said, who may speak, and who has access to certain forms of discourse. But this circulation is politicized in moments when such limitations are transgressed by disruptive speech. Thus, for Rancière, political action occurs when attempts to police the circulation of words fail; when those who have been deprived or debarred from access to words make their voices heard.

The significance of this concept of political action as “literarity” is that it makes no distinction between public and private or between different activities or ways of life. This is illustrated by Rancière’s *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (2012). In contrast to more standard historical accounts of the working class, such as E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), Rancière is not interested in workers’ “class consciousness.” Instead, he is interested in the literarity of individual workers. Of his subjects, Gabriel Gauny (1806-1889) is the best example. A joiner by trade, Gauny fashioned an ascetic way of life for himself that minimized his dependence on wages and maximized his free time to think, write, and wander the streets airing his thoughts. Gauny’s story is a perfect example of what Rancière means by literarity: as a child, he would read from the scraps of text used as wrappings for the lentils that his mother would bring home from the market. Thus, by circulating in the most banal yet unlikely of ways – as packaging for a dietary staple – words fell into Gauny’s hands.

With his “politics of literature” and his novel conception of political action as “literarity,” Rancière levels the traditional hierarchy between the lives of the extraordinary and the ordinary. In addition, he makes it possible for us to see politics in places that we would not normally look, such as in the privacy of the workshop or the diary of a day-laborer, to cite examples from his *Proletarian Nights*. In this way, his conception of biography as democracy goes much farther than Arendt’s, which is hamstrung by her distinctions between public and private as well as labor and action.

At this point, let us summarize the ways in which this study works with and against Arendt. This project was inspired by her conception of the biographic self: the idea that we become who we are through what we do, through our life story. Furthermore, I retain her emphasis on human finitude and non-sovereignty: we have little control over life’s outcomes, and in particular political affairs. Politics is a process of interaction that shapes our identities but over which no one is in control. Given these parameters, thinking biographically gives us insight into the component pieces of political life – the actions of individuals – and consequently into the roots of our identity.

However, I differ with Arendt on the questions of humanity, methodology, and democracy. Through pairing Arendt with Agamben, I come to the conclusion that it is dangerous and false to tie humanity and identity together, and that it is better to treat them as two separate questions. Then, through engagement with Foucault, I suggest that we are better off leaving behind Arendt’s “phenomenological humanism,” with its thick description of the human condition, and adopting a discursive-analytic approach. This approach reveals that biographizing itself is a political act, especially when the lives of the marginalized, neglected, and misrecognized are recounted. Finally, I carry these lessons learned from Foucault over to an engagement with Jacques Rancière. Rancière points us to a discursive notion of political action and a democratized genre of biography.

Chapter Summary

This study is divided into four chapters. Each of these chapters is a treatment of a single author's work, beginning with Arendt and continuing with Agamben, Foucault, and Rancière. In each of these chapters, I juxtapose these author's theoretical writings with their biographic works, treating the latter not merely as illustrative examples but as contributions to theory in their own right.

In chapter 1, "The Miracle of Life: Hannah Arendt and the 'Story-Form' of Human Being," I analyze Arendt's idea of the "biographic self:" that our life story determines who we are. Perhaps the most provocative implication of this idea is that autobiography is, in some sense, a mistake, or as Adriana Cavarero puts it, an "absurd exercise" (Cavarero 2000, 24). I illustrate this argument through a reading of Arendt's biography of the German-Jewish salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), which recounts Varnhagen's intellectual journey from Romanticism, which taught her to live her life as if it were a work of art, to her embrace of her Jewish identity, a biographical and historical fact from which she had long tried to escape. The moral of Varnhagen's story, if one can reduce it to that, is that life is not like art: it is not something that we are free to create as we see fit. It is not a product of our imagination. Instead, it is real, it is factual, and the things that we do – as well as the things that are done to us – have consequences that shape us into who we are.

In chapter 2, "To Be or To Be Able to Be: Giorgio Agamben on the Potentiality of Humanity," I engage with the work of Giorgio Agamben in order to critique a disquieting aspect of Arendt's notion of the "biographic self:" for her, our biography is not only what makes us who we are, it is also what makes us "specifically human" (Arendt 1998, 97). Contrary to Arendt, Agamben argues that what makes us human is not what we do, but our "potentiality" – what we *can* do. The stakes of this challenge are made clear in Agamben's book, *Remnants of Auschwitz*. In this book, Agamben focuses on a recurrent figure from survivor testimonials: *der Muselmann*.

German for “Muslim,” the *Muselmann* was a slang term used by inmates of Auschwitz to describe fellow inmates who through starvation, exhaustion, and brutalization had come to resemble “the living dead.” Whereas Arendt can only conclude that these victims had become dehumanized, Agamben holds that they remained human beings because their potentiality could not be destroyed. This comparison exposes a dangerous mistake in Arendt’s thinking: the conflation of identity with humanity. While I do not agree with Agamben that we should disavow our identity and our actions in favor of “pure potentiality,” I contend that identity is a cultural artifact, not part of human nature.

In chapter 3, “To Err Is Human: Biography vs. Biopolitics in Michel Foucault,” I pursue this new line of thinking through engagement with Foucault’s historico-epistemological method. From this perspective, individual identities are the contingent product of historically specific forms of knowledge. I illustrate this by turning to two dossiers that Foucault compiled about obscure 19th-century Frenchmen: *I, Pierre Rivière*, about a “village idiot” who murdered his mother, brother, and sister and was declared insane; and *Herculine Barbin*, about an intersexed person raised by nuns as a “girl” but, upon receiving a medical exam in early adulthood, was forced by the state to identify as a “man.” In both dossiers, Foucault juxtaposes the subjective, autobiographical documents of their titular subjects with objective, official documents written about these subjects by the legal and medical professionals who observed them. The point is not to provide a well-rounded and definitive portrait of these individuals, nor to vindicate either side, but rather to highlight the political struggle between individuals and institutions over identity. The authorities ascribed to these individuals an identity – “madman” in Rivière’s case, just “man” in Barbin’s – that they rejected. Through their acts of self-identification, these individuals took up impossible identities that transgressed the epistemic limits of the historical world in which they lived.

In chapter 4, “Life, Literarity, and Equality for All: Biography as Democracy in Jacques Rancière,” I pursue this line of thinking further through engagement with the work of Rancière. My aim is to articulate a more robust and democratic conception of self-identification than we find in Foucault. Whereas Foucault is focused on the way institutions ascribe identities to individuals, Rancière emphasizes the other side of the story: how individuals act to give shape to their own lives. I illustrate this through a reading of Rancière’s book, *Proletarian Nights*. Like Foucault’s dossiers, it is based on extensive archival research, exhuming the lives of the obscure and forgotten, in this case members of the 19th-century French working class. Unlike Foucault, however, Rancière does not juxtapose the words of his subjects with official history. Instead, with his free indirect style of writing, he immerses himself – and the reader – in the perspectives of his subjects. What we gain from Rancière, I contend, is a “democratized” conception of biography, in which the life of anyone at all may be written, and anyone at all may be considered to be a political actor.

Restatement

Acts of Identity is prompted by a puzzle: why do political theorists bother with biography? Above, I have given an outline of my answer: biography is a lens through which to view the link between identity and action. It affords us the insight that who we are is a consequence of what we do.

This insight challenges one of the primary values of our modern political life: autonomy. Liberalism, republicanism, and critical theory in its various strands have all either presupposed this capacity or posited it as a goal to be achieved. Against this modern ideal, I contend that we are not the sovereign masters of our own lives, let alone our political circumstances. Instead, I contend that our actions – and thus our identities – take shape in the unpredictability of interaction.

Moreover – and most urgent in the current political moment – this study of biography will hopefully help us to rethink “identity politics,” which has become an ambivalent, contested notion.

The core problem with identity politics as it is currently practiced is that it takes identity as a preestablished position and politics as a program of action that is derived from this fixed position. In this book, I contend that we would be better off thinking the other way around. We need to begin with politics – understood as an open-ended action-process – to retrace the roots of identities. Only in this way will we be able to view identities in their full complexity and potential for change.

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