

REVIEW ESSAY

Laboring Lives: New Approaches to Biography and Labor History in Latin America

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Julio Pinto Vallejos, *Luis Emilio Recabarren: Una biografía histórica* (Santiago de Chile, 2013).

Daniela Spenser, *In Combat: The Life of Lombardo Toledano* (Chicago, IL, 2019).

John D. French, *Lula and his Politics of Cunning: From Metal Worker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).

Abstract

Until recently, historians, including labor historians, tended to view biography as an inferior genre of historical writing. This has started to change, as biography moves away from its narrow focus on “great men.” Historians increasingly see it as a way to explore, as Marx famously suggested, how men make their own history albeit not under circumstances of their choosing. This essay examines recent biographies of three of the most important labor leaders in Latin America: Chile’s Luis Emilio Recabarren, Mexico’s Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and Brazil’s Lula. Although they approach the study of the interplay of the personal and the political in different ways, all three studies provide strong evidence that biography has an important role to play in sharpening our understanding of the history of labor.

As historians Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles note in a 2011 article in *Labour History*, “there has been perhaps no more repudiated notion in historical practice than the idea of exulting the role of the great man in history.”¹ For this reason, and to some extent correctly, historians have tended to view biography as an inferior genre of historical writing, “closer to fiction than to history.”² As David Nasaw notes in his introduction to a 2009 “Roundtable on Historians and Biography” in the *American Historical Review*, arguably the preeminent journal in the field, “biography remains the profession’s unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the ruffraff.”³ Historians object, as Nick Salvatore notes, “that no one individual can serve as a useful vehicle to explore deeper social tendencies.”⁴ As such, “serious” history has tended to stay away from biography—a genre that has attracted dilettantes who seek to associate themselves with the “great men” of the past.⁵

And yet, for some years now, biography has gained a new legitimacy as reputable historians turn their attention to “great” men and, increasingly “great” women, and, just as important, to the “little people” of history. As Nasaw notes, “Biography is no longer restricted to the lives of the rich, powerful, famous, and infamous. There are infinite stories to be told of unknown, inarticulate, unlettered men, women, and children, and, as feminist, labor, and social historians have discovered, telling them offers a fruitful approach to reexamining, and perhaps reconfiguring, the categories of class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual.”⁶

This change in appreciation of biography as a genre of historical writing, what is sometimes referred to as the “new biography,” may be a product of broader changes in the field. According to Jo Burr Margadant, “The resurrection of biography ends four decades of historical writing, during which—under the weight of interpretative approaches drawn from the social sciences—individual life histories lay nearly as dormant for academic history as the dead.”⁷ François Dosse speaks of “l’heure du biographique (the biographical moment).”⁸

Far from being an arcane, marginal field, historians now increasingly view biography as offering a privileged perspective on the past. As Ludmila Jordanova notes, “reconstructing a life can be a form of *histoire totale* (total history) on a limited scale.”⁹ In the field of labor history, where social history approaches have long dominated, “the trajectory [...] had always tended to the impersonal and the institutional.”¹⁰ But as several authors note, in labor history too, biography, both of individuals and of collectives, has gained ground as a legitimate field of historical writing. Perhaps this ought not to be surprising. As Malcolm Chase reminds us, “biography brings us back to Marx’s famous sentence, according to which ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.’”¹¹ “The test, then, for biography,” Nick Salvatore suggests, “is not whether the subject is representative, whatever that may mean, but rather what it is that we might learn from a study of a specific life.”¹² Put differently, labor biographies have the potential to add to our understanding of the key questions that inform the field of labor history.

In Latin America, with some exceptions, biography is not a genre that has attracted much attention from historians.¹³ As Michael Monteón noted in a 2005 essay on the topic, “biography is one of the most popular genres, and it says something about the perversity of Latin American historians, including myself, that we do so little of it.”¹⁴ There are some notable biographies—in the case of Mexico, for example, John Womack’s on Zapata and Friedrich Katz’s on Pancho Villa set an extraordinarily high bar.¹⁵ But despite a market for “popular” biographies, historians of Latin America have generally not embraced the biographical genre—or when they have, they have tended to write about presidents and caudillos.¹⁶ Biographies of labor leaders, consequently, are rare.

The biographies surveyed here examine the lives of three of the most well-known labor leaders of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Chile’s Luis Emilio Recabarren, Mexico’s Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and Brazil’s Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Of course, Lula is also known as a politician, but John French’s biography, as the subtitle of the book suggests, is primarily concerned with how his subject went

from being a “metalworker” to becoming “President of Brazil,” and that trajectory is largely a product of his role as a labor leader. Though they focus on three different countries, read together these biographies offer compelling perspectives on three major periods, or processes, in the history of the labor movement in Latin America, and by extension, of the history of Latin America. Julio Pinto Vallejos’s biography of Recabarren offers insights into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ideological and organizational shift within the labor movement from anarchism, on the one hand, to syndicalism and socialism/communism, on the other. Daniela Spenser’s biography of Lombardo Toledano illuminates the struggle between communism and anticommunism in the context of what is sometimes called “national populism” and the Cold War. Finally, French’s portrait of Lula explores the experience of the new unionism, military repression, and the post-Cold War Pink Tide of leftist governments in the region. Of course, these processes were not uniform across the region. The Wobblies, for example, were active in Chile but less so elsewhere. No national labor confederation matched the power of Mexico’s Central de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Mexican Workers’ Central), which Lombardo Toledano dominated. And there was no equivalent to São Paulo’s ABC industrial region whence a Lula-like figure could emerge. Still, while they ostensibly illuminate national histories, these three biographies do inform a broader historical understanding of Latin American labor.

All three biographies correspond to the “contextual biography (*biographie et contexte*)” type that Giovanni Levi identifies.¹⁷ They are written by experts in the contextual history of each life. Julio Pinto, one of Chile’s most distinguished historians, has written extensively on the history of Chilean labor on the *pampa salitrera* (the nitrate economy of northern Chile) and on the history of Chilean socialism, and he presents his study “not as an individual biography but as a historical biography” (10). Daniela Spenser, a globally-recognized expert in the history of the Cold War in Latin America and, more specifically, on the history of communism in Mexico, sees Lombardo Toledano’s life as “a window into the history of the twentieth century” (2). And John French, the author of one of the key studies of the historical development of São Paulo’s ABC region and a leading scholar of Brazilian state-labor relations, intends for his biography “to shed light on the worldview of the working poor, how radical social movements emerge, and how they can transform themselves” (2). All three follow a recognizable pattern of historians who turn to biography later in their careers, drawing on their extensive expertise to properly contextualize the lives they study.

All three biographies are structured in a conventional manner, narrating the life of the subject from birth to death in the case of Recabarren and Lombardo Toledano, and from birth to his release from prison in late 2019 in the case of Lula. (A new edition of the book, one would imagine, would extend the study at least to Lula’s third electoral victory at the end of October 2022). French inserts a short section, “Lula’s Apotheosis,” at the start of his book, which begins with Lula’s victory in Brazil’s 2002 presidential elections. But other than this brief section, the structure of the book is conventional, moving forward in time as the subjects of the biographies pass through the different stages of their lives. Interestingly, both Pinto and Spenser address several issues in their biographies but do not put forward a general organizing concept. By

contrast, French draws on a specific notion, “the politics of cunning,” which is present already in the subtitle of the book, as a key analytical category. Cunning (*astúcia* in Portuguese) evokes figures like the “trickster” (which, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis also invokes in her biography of Leo Africanus) and other concepts, such as James Scott’s “weapons of the weak,” to refer to a way of doing politics or dealing with the powerful. It’s an idea that, as French shows, Lula drew on, and arguably perfected, but it’s also one that more generally characterized the working people of Greater São Paulo’s ABC.¹⁸

Reading the three biographies together offers valuable insight into the opportunities and problems that biographical sources present to historians. In the case of Recabarren, Pinto had to contend with a relative scarcity of sources. He had access to Recabarren’s writings, which are available in published compilations, but his analysis is heavily reliant on periodicals and particularly on the worker press (from the north of Chile and from Santiago). In the case of Lombardo Toledano, Spenser had access to the Fondo Histórico Lombardo Toledano held at the Universidad Obrera de México, which Lombardo Toledano founded. This archive contains “1256 files from 1894 to 1969, composed of letters, telegrams, articles, work notes, lectures, keynotes and general correspondence of Dr. Vicente Lombardo Toledano.”¹⁹ It is as close to a “total archive” as any biographer could hope to find. Finally, in the case of Lula, French not only had to contend with a subject who is still alive and who can therefore be studied with a constantly expanding number of potential sources—including a major biopic, endless interviews, and several biographies—but also with someone who is a biographer of himself, who, in the words of Christian Dutilleux (who French quotes), uses “his biography as a political instrument” (25).

These different “life archives,” if we can call them that, shape to a considerable extent what is achievable in terms of connecting the personal and political; though, of course, the approach the historian takes is not only dictated by the availability of sources. The biographer’s personal interests must matter too. In the case of Recabarren, Pinto draws on a limited number of personal letters, but in general, the biographer had limited access to sources that might have shed light on the personal. Thus, the focus is on Recabarren’s activism as a labor organizer and political figure and on his evolving political views. We learn relatively little about his personal life, his childhood, or, for that matter, his state of mind. (He seems to have been something of a curmudgeon, disapproving of Argentina’s love of carnival [59]). Pinto does not explore in detail the causes of Recabarren’s suicide in late 1924, though the narrative does establish a growing disillusionment with politics in his later years.

In contrast, Spenser had access to Lombardo Toledano’s extensive personal correspondence and diaries. This included travel diaries, which could have provided insight into his personal life. However, except for some discussion of his family relations, and the occasional reference to his personal interests, such as bear hunting or attendance at football games during a visit to London, the narrative Spenser weaves is largely driven by Lombardo Toledano’s union and political work.

By contrast, French does explore in some detail Lula’s personal life and sees it as key to his political outlook and style. Lula’s mother, Dona Lindu, appears as a sort of

moral compass for the Silva family—in contrast to Lula’s absentee father, a violent *malandro*, or petty criminal figure. Dona Lindu, French tells his readers, “was an unquestionable success ... she had produced hardworking, honest children without losing a single boy to criminality or daughter to prostitution” (47). Equally, if not more, important to the intersection of the personal and political in the biography is Lula’s brother, Frei Chico. An early chapter (with a Dickensian title, “A Tale of Two Brothers”) serves to establish the clear contrast between Lula, a “good boy” and Frei Chico, the “rebel,” who became a militant leftist. French uses the two brothers, as indeed Lula himself has done (233), to explore the different trajectories of São Paulo, and, by extension, Brazil’s unionized workers. The author contrasts the ideological and radicalized minority, represented by Frei Chico, and the majority, represented by Lula, less overtly political but ultimately more effective in extracting concessions from employers and in political organizing. Unlike Frei Chico, who, like the militant Left, became marginal to the labor movement, Lula’s brand of politics, and Lula himself, French suggests, succeeded in embodying the aspirations of those he sought to lead.

Either because of the range of sources available to him or because of the questions that he has sought to tackle with his biography, French’s study of Lula conforms more than either Pinto’s study of Recabarren or Spenser’s biography of Lombardo Toledano to what Margadant sees as a key characteristic of the “new biography.” According to Margadant, “The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence of an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person.”²⁰ French shows convincingly how Lula learned to be Lula, or rather created Lula, through many years of, to use an apt metaphor, “learning on the job”—first as a trade union leader and then later as a leader of Brazil’s Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party, PT). He does so by exploring “the social, political, and cultural processes through which Luiz Inácio da Silva became the imagined Lula who is now the common property of all Brazilians” (3). Interestingly, in the final chapters of the book, which deal with Lula now fully constituted, the biographical mode of earlier chapters starts to be replaced by an exposition where the biographical character of the account becomes less evident.

An interesting contrast is the role of the transnational or global in the development of these three labor leaders’ political trajectories. In both Recabarren and Lombardo Toledano’s cases, travel (to Buenos Aires, Europe, the United States, and the Soviet Union), the international circulation of ideas (anarchism, socialism, communism, and anti-communism), and the role of transnational organizations (the Socialist International, the Communist International, the International Labor Organization, and various inter-American and global labor federations) shape the labor leaders’ outlooks and strategies in clear ways. By contrast, French’s account of Lula pays relatively little attention to the transnational or global (comparisons to Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez aside), even as the winds of political change in the late Cold War period are clearly influencing the background to Lula’s political development. Lula’s life and political trajectory, however, seems driven far more by local and national social and political processes, such as internal migration from the Northeast to the industrial

heartlands of São Paulo, the various legacies of the Getúlio Vargas regimes, the import substitution strategies of Brazil's own *trente glorieuses*, and the particular inflection of Brazil's bureaucratic authoritarian regime and the subsequent transition to democracy.

Despite these and other differences, all three books significantly enhance our understanding of the labor history of these three countries and of Latin America, more generally. In the case of Brazil, French shows convincingly (if at times rather fawningly) both how Lula was a product of São Paulo's ABC and how he went on to shape decisively its political trajectory. Ironically, in the 2022 elections, Lula's support came not from São Paulo but rather from the Northeast, which his family, like thousands of others, left in the early 1950s in search of a better life. Lombardo Toledano looms large over Mexican labor history, matched only perhaps by his trade union rivals Luis Morones and Fidel Velázquez. In an account where sometimes excessive quoting from primary sources gets in the way of clarity of exposition, Spenser paints a picture of a somewhat unpleasant man, whose political strategy was driven primarily by his own interests—and those of the governments he served—rather than, or even at the cost of, those of Mexico's working class.²¹ Finally, Pinto's sympathetic account of Recabarren offers a compelling study of the social and ideological forces, condensed in, but also shaped by, Recabarren's personal and political life—forces that influenced Chile's particular political development and ultimately gave rise to one of Latin America's most important and enduring leftist political traditions.

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Notes

1. Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles, "Representative Lives? Biography and Labour History," *Labour History* 100 (2011): 127.
2. Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 625–30.
3. David Nasaw, "Introduction," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 573.
4. Nick Salvatore, "Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship," *Labour History*, no. 87 (2004): 188.
5. See, for example, disgraced former British prime minister Boris Johnson's biography of Winston Churchill: *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (London, 2014).
6. Nasaw, "Introduction," 576.
7. Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 1.
8. François Dosse, *Le pari biographique: Écrire une vie* (Paris, 2011), iii.
9. Ludmila Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000), 41.
10. Malcolm Chase, "Labour History's Biographical Turn," *History Workshop Journal* 92 (2021): 195.
11. Chase, "Labour History's Biographical Turn," 205.
12. Salvatore, "Biography and Social History," 190.
13. In the case of Argentina, see the collection *Biografías argentinas*, published by Edhasa. Most of the biographies in this collection are of "great" men, though for the most part they are not hagiographies, and some, like Mariano Ben Plotkin's biography of the socialist intellectual José Ingenieros, are excellent examples of a successful "dialectical" relationship (Plotkin's term, 16) between person and context. See Mariano Ben Plotkin, *José Ingenieros: El hombre que lo quería todo*, *Biografías argentinas* (Buenos Aires, 2021).

14. Michael Monteón, “Biography and Latin American History,” *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 2 (2005): 193–206.
15. See John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican revolution* (New York, 1970) and Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford, CA, 1998).
16. This may be beginning to change. For two examples in English, see Tanya Harmer, *Beatriz Allende: A Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020); Tiffany A. Sippial, *Celia Sánchez Manduley: The Life and Legacy of a Cuban Revolutionary* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).
17. Giovanni Levi, “Les usages de la biographie,” trans. Olivier Christin, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 44, no. 6 (1989): 1325–36. The other types in his typology are “prosopographie et biographie nodale,” “biographie et cas limites,” and “biographie et herméneutique.”
18. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (London, 2008).
19. For a description of the Fondo Histórico Lombardo Toledano, see <https://www.uom.mx/fondo-historico-lombardo-toledano/>.
20. Margadant, *The New Biography*, 7.
21. Spenser quotes Elena Poniatowska’s pointed question to Lombardo Toledano: “How is it possible that you, having always been in the opposition, have always been a friend of whoever was president at the time?” Spenser, *In Combat*, 374.