

# Thesis Eleven

<http://the.sagepub.com>

---

**Review Essay: Exemplary Stories: On the Uses of Biography in Recent Sociology: Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (University of Chicago, 2005); Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2007); Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (Routledge, 2006)**

Eduardo de la Fuente  
*Thesis Eleven* 2009; 97; 115  
DOI: 10.1177/0725513608101913

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://the.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Thesis Eleven* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://the.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://the.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://the.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/97/1/115>



*Review Essay*

EXEMPLARY STORIES: ON  
THE USES OF BIOGRAPHY  
IN RECENT SOCIOLOGY

***Eduardo de la Fuente***

Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties* (University of Chicago, 2005); Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2007); Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (Routledge, 2006)

Ever since William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1927: 1833) declared, in their pioneering *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, that '[p]ersonal life records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect* type of sociological material', sociologists have been debating the merits of biographical materials. Central to these debates has been the issue of what value – epistemological, theoretical and political – one can attribute to materials drawn from personal experience. Discussions concerning the usefulness of biographical methods in sociology also often reflect a certain unease regarding whether personal narratives make the grade as, what Emile Durkheim famously termed, 'social facts'.

Yet the current popularity of life history and life story in the social sciences suggests that the appreciation of biographical methods is growing, and the anxiety over the subjective nature of these materials is subsiding. My contention in this review article is that much hinges on the 'exemplary' character imputed to these biographical narratives. Much of the validity and 'pathos' of these stories derives from what we mean when we say that a biography 'exemplifies' this or that about social life in general.

*Thesis Eleven*, Number 97, May 2009: 115–129  
SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC)  
Copyright © 2009 SAGE Publications and *Thesis Eleven* Co-op Ltd  
DOI: 10.1177/0725513608101913

My review begins with a brief sketch of how biography has been dealt with in sociology before moving on to the emergence of the genre of sociological autobiographies. When sociologists write their own biographies, or collect those of their peers, they have to be especially reflective about what can be said and not said on the basis of these materials. I then consider a collection of sociological autobiographies organized around the theme of sociologists 'coming of age' during the 1960s and reflect on whether the interest in the 'personal' is part of the cultural legacy of that decade. Additionally, I review two texts concerned with 'globalization'. One of these texts deals with the globalization of sociologists' own lives and careers, the other with seeing globalization and its impact on the emotional life of individuals through the lens of biographical case studies. These latter texts raise the issue of whether biography is best placed to tackle issues of contemporary social and cultural change.

### **HOW EXEMPLARY? A BRIEF SKETCH OF BIOGRAPHY IN SOCIOLOGY**

To suggest that biographical narratives are to some extent 'exemplary', and that's why they have come to be valued by sociologists, may at first seem counter-intuitive. I can hear proponents of a biographical approach replying: 'the real strength of biography is precisely the opposite: it highlights the role of subjective, lived experience in social life'. But the word 'exemplary' has various connotations and sociologists using biography have evoked these different meanings at one time or another. Let me highlight some of the more common assumptions about biography.

One of the connotations of exemplary is that a particular thing typifies, is a model of, or an ideal case of, some more general condition. Max Weber (1976) not only coined the concept of the 'ideal type', in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he also utilized the autobiographical reflections of Richard Baxter and Benjamin Franklin as exemplars of the worldview of 'inner worldly asceticism'. The exemplary logic here is applied by the sociologist rather than by the subject of the biography. A version of this is also discernible in C. Wright Mills' evocation of biography in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). He declares biography to be one of the three 'co-ordinate points' of the 'proper study of man', the other two being 'history' and 'social structure' (Mills, 1959: 143). But, on the whole, Mills prefers the sociological generalization to the individual's awareness of him or herself: 'Max Weber's idea of "The Puritan Man", of his motives and of his function within religious and economic institutions, enables us to understand him better than he understood himself' (p. 162).

Biographical narratives are also exemplary to the extent that they 'embody', 'illustrate', 'flesh out' and 'give testimony to' certain social experiences. Despite his preference for systematic sociological reflection over individual

awareness of a situation, Mills appreciated the role that personal experience could play in generating sociological knowledge. He devotes a significant part of the section on 'intellectual craftsmanship' to reflecting on the use of personal diaries as a way of 'developing self-reflective habits' and learning 'how to keep your inner world awake' (Mills, 1959: 197). Biography, and reflection upon things that happen to an individual, gives sociological reflection an anchor in lived experience.

But biography can also be exemplary in the sense of 'meriting' being told. Exemplary can also mean 'good', 'excellent' or 'meritorious', and I guess this is where biographical narratives gain some of their metaphysical pathos and moral profundity. What makes a biographical narrative compelling has shifted over time. Our age seems less inclined to favor stories of elites over popular and everyday accounts (the obsession with fame notwithstanding), and identity narratives flourish in line with the sentiment that the 'personal is political'. The 'subaltern' and the marginalized also gain a certain cultural significance in an age of biography. It is well documented how these shifting political and cultural concerns have impacted the social sciences, including sociological methods (Chase, 2005: 654–5). The politics of identity has also heightened anxieties about the role of witness and expert, story-teller and analyst, with 'reflexivity' and letting subjects speak in their 'own voice' becoming common methodological values (pp. 660–7).

There is one final connotation of the term exemplary worth mentioning: the notion that the exemplar provides a self-contained 'illustration' or 'showing'. The relative importance attached to the particular and the general varies in different sociological approaches, but as a rule the greater the commitment to a hermeneutic or interpretative approach the more the emphasis will be on the case study, the subjectivity, the textuality of the biographical narrative under consideration. A good example is Franco Ferrarotti's *On the Science of Uncertainty* (2005), which contends that what contemporary sociology needs most is a 'social hermeneutics of individual concrete actions' and that the 'biographical method' is best placed to achieve that aim (p. 55). For this author, every autobiography is already a set of human practices, a set of 'dreams, fantasies, accomplishments, and behaviors' through which individuals actively experience the social (p. xviii). From this perspective it becomes meaningless to ask: how many biographies must I collect in order to make reasonable sociological claims? Biography itself is a rich representation of social life.

## **THE GENRE OF SOCIOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

How exemplary must a personal story be when the genre in question is writing about sociological lives? When the 'high priest' of sociological positivism, Paul Lazarsfeld, was asked to provide an autobiographical account, he laid down the following rules:

Autobiographies deserve to be written under any one of the three conditions: if the author is a man of great achievement (Einstein, Churchill); if, due to his position, he has been in contact with important people or important events (a foreign correspondent); or if by external circumstances he can be considered a 'case' representing a situation or development of interest. (Lazarsfeld, 1969: 270)

Lazarsfeld argues that the sociologist taking on the role of autobiographer might be considered an 'expert witness' who combines the function of gathering the materials of social research (in this case, one's own biography) with that of analysing it. This is something of a privileged position as it means the sociologist is in the rarest of positions, that of being both the 'subject' and 'object', 'interpreter' and 'interpreted', in an account. Lazarsfeld (1969: 271) opts for juggling these twin roles through the tactic of highlighting the inherent sociological value of his personal story: he describes his 'memoir' as a 'contribution to the study of innovation in higher education' – the innovation in question being the importation of the model of an institute of applied research from Vienna to the United States.

Lazarsfeld also points towards an important rationale for sociological autobiography: we get an insight into 'the decisions lying behind the final product' (1969: 271). However, until recently the dominant form of narrative in the genre of sociological autobiography was autobiographical reflection by 'famous' sociologists. Sociologists such as Robert Ezra Park (1950), Pitirim Sorokin (1963), Lewis Coser (1993), Robert Merton (1996) and Edward Shils (2006) published autobiographical accounts. They range from short essays through to book-length publications. These accounts are 'exemplary' in the sense of containing first-hand accounts by some of the 'heroes' and 'history makers' in the discipline. They provide much that is of interest to historians of sociology and also complement the voluminous secondary texts that have sought to contextualize sociological thinkers in terms of biography and context (Coser, 1977; Pampel, 2000). More often than not, these autobiographical accounts are not 'exemplary' in the sense of being 'typical'. Indeed, as a general rule, the more famous the sociologist the less the writing of their personal story is likely to conform to the taxonomic logic that sociologists apply to other biographies. The title of one autobiographical reflection is telling: 'A Sociologist's Atypical Life' (Coser, 1993).

A change in the function of sociological autobiography is discernible during the period in which the notion of a 'reflexive sociologist' emerged and the 'personal reality of the social theorist' gained traction as a concept (Gouldner, 1970, 1973). The emphasis shifted towards collections of autobiographical essays, as seen in Irving Louis Horowitz's *Sociological Self-Images* (1969). The underlying theme here is the sociology of sociology – i.e. a sociology that reflects on the social and institutional conditions governing its own practices, including the forces that shaped individual practitioners. As interest in the status of the author and in the politics of identity grew, the genre flourished. Increasingly, it has started to be seen as 'research' into

sociologists. The selection criteria in these instances may be closer to that in social research more generally: what do we learn from such and such a population? Whose views do we select and why, and whose views are worth comparing?

In addition to being 'instructive' and 'revealing', sociological autobiographies are also seen as 'fleshing out' and 'personalizing' knowledge about sociologists. As the editor of the collection *Authors of Their Own Lives* puts it, the 'aim is to render the presence of the person in the work, the author in the authored' (Berger, 1990: xv). The editor suggests that, during the last 50 years, academic sociology has been governed by a 'rhetoric of academic impersonality [that] has an elective affinity to the rhetoric of bureaucracies' (p. xx). The hope is that in using the 'first-person singular' of the witness, sociological autobiographies will serve as an 'effective antidote' to some of the 'excessive professionalism' that plagues the discipline (p. xx). Berger also believes that biographical writing might have the advantage of making the work of sociologists more accessible.

But there is little doubt that sociological autobiographies are exemplary stories by sociologists, for sociologists. The editor of *Authors of Their Own Lives* reassures the reader that autobiography provides important insights into the 'habitus' of the sociological practitioners, and that what appears personal is in fact sociological through and through. While many of the details surrounding a sociologist's private life, such as conversations with peers and mentors, career failures and successes, have the appearance of 'gossip', autobiographical reflection has the advantage of both providing important 'insider information' and fleshing out the myriad networks of collaboration, gate-keeping and prestige that accompany intellectual work. A collection such as *Authors of Their Lives* is also rich in details related to class, ethnicity and gender. There are sociologists from patrician families (David Riesman), 'archetypal stories of American social mobility' (Joseph Gusfield, Nathan Glazer), migration narratives (Reinhard Bendix, Guenther Roth and Herbert J. Gans) and narratives that deal with the negotiation of gender (Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Alice S. Rossi) (Berger, 1990: xxiv).

While many of the benefits of collecting sociological autobiographies are self-evident, important questions remain: for example, are we simply reading a sociologist's attempt at literary 'impression management', an attempt to control whether we see them as 'this' or 'that' kind of sociologist? There are also, as Randall Collins (1986: 109) says of Erving Goffman, those intellectuals who 'manage to appear even more original . . . because [they are] adept at burying [their] tracks'. The editor of *Authors of Their Own Lives* suggests that sociological autobiography has a built-in system of checks and balances: 'Sociologists and their readers . . . often have especially good antennae for detecting ideology and are not easily deceived by it' (Berger, 1990: xvii). This remains to be seen.

## GENERATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: SOCIAL THEORISTS SHAPED BY THE 1960S

Alan Sica and Stephen Turner's edited collection, *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, contains autobiographical contributions by prominent sociologists such as Andrew Abbott, Jeffrey Alexander, Michael Burawoy, Craig Calhoun, Hans Joas, Karin Knorr Certina, Michel Maffesoli, William Outhwaite, Saskia Sassen, Bryan Turner, Steve Woolgar and Eric Olin Wright on the significance of the 1960s to their own intellectual formation. All the authors were born between 1944 and 1952, and 'entered sociology near the time of the great cultural explosion since known as "the events of 1968"' (Sica and Turner, 2005: x). The usual themes associated with the '60s are on display: the Vietnam War, conscription, Civil Rights, feminism, radical politics, sex, drugs, popular culture, counter-cultural lifestyles and suspicion towards 'canons' and other forms of authority. The underlying assumption of the collection is that 'this generation of students lived a pedagogical and cultural experience that distinctly separated them from those who came just before and those who followed a few years later' (p. xi). For example, compared to their pre-1968 peers, sociologists studying during this period were less likely to have 'continuing confidence that sociology and science, uncorrupted by political forces' could ameliorate social problems; they also faced a very different labor market to those who had come through during the immediate post-war expansion of the university sector (pp. xi–xii).

In asking this group of eminent social scholars to reflect on the experiences, the collection hoped to tackle two key questions: 'What did it mean to be formed, intellectually, politically, and personally, between 1966 and 1972?'; and 'Is there a definably "Sixties" way of seeing the social world and of reacting to it as a scholar and social theorist?' (Sica, 2005: 2). The editors admit that the collection might strike some readers as an exercise in 'Baby Boomer' self-indulgence and navel gazing, but they suggest that understanding the personal is now part of the *zeitgeist*:

One might fairly argue that our intellectual period has been colonized by biography and autobiography – that where once stood disembodied ideas we now find personalized reflections . . . learning about the private mechanisms that give rise to creative endeavors has become at least as intriguing as 'the ideas themselves'. (Sica and Turner, 2005: ix)

The editors argue that an interest in the voice and personhood of the social theorist is also discernible in the sub-genre of the published interview. Indeed, 'judged by citations', published interviews with serious thinkers 'have attained the status of canonical texts' (p. ix). The 'intellectual self-examinations' of figures such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu have become indispensable resources for scholars and students of social theory. Sica and Turner add that as 'teaching social theory is notoriously difficult . . . we hope that our book might well serve as a textbook for the study of

contemporary theory' (p. xiii). In this collection, Alexander's 'The Sixties and Me: From Cultural Revolution to Cultural Theory' and Hans Joas' 'A Pragmatist from Germany' stand out as theoretical self-examinations that help us to understand their own theoretical journeys.

But the majority of the autobiographical reflections in *The Disobedient Generation* tend to be more 'personal' than 'theoretical'. To a large extent this is perfectly in keeping with the importance that the decade attached to personal identity and to transforming one's personal conduct. As one of the contributors recollects: 'daily life became our field of struggle . . . we obeyed the slogan The Personal is Political, and acknowledged that change should occur in and through face-to-face relationships' (Jedlowski, 2005: 144). Another contributor describes her own form of rebellion as consisting of 'personal counterculture statements, like marrying all in black rather than white' (Knorr Cetina, 2005: 180). But the blurring of the boundary between the personal and the political also pushed some of these individuals into sociology for directly political reasons. In 'An Antinomian Marxist', Michael Burawoy, the major proponent of 'public sociology' in contemporary international sociology, recounts how his engagement with Marxism sprang from his study of work in places as different as Zambia, Chicago, Hungary and Russia. And in 'My Back Pages', Craig Calhoun (2005: 72) comments on the irony that someone 'who first took up sociology while performing his alternative service as a conscientious objector during the Viet Nam War' is completing his autobiographical reflections decades later in Ho Chi Minh City as it embraces globalization and he visits it as President of the Social Science Research Council.

So to what extent are these autobiographical narratives 'exemplary'? They certainly seem to capture a generational consciousness regarding what kind of sociologist one felt the need to be as a result of the political and cultural upheavals commonly associated with the period. However, reflecting the '60s is not quite the same as reflecting upon the '60s. In this respect, Bryan Turner (2005: 277) offers a nice sociological edge to his memoir in noting that the events of May 1968 involved 'a fusion of the private and the public, the existential and the objective' – something he terms 'transpolitical individualism'. He adds that 'another important change' was the 'development of "culture" as a field of conflict and contestation' (p. 277). Lifestyle and culture became sites of struggle and acquired greater significance. Turner also notes that 'Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* . . . still provides the best sociological reflection on these changes' (p. 277). It is worth remembering that Bell (1976) diagnosed the cultural sensibility of the '60s as involving, amongst other things, the 'democratization of genius'. The current vogue for autobiography, including amongst sociologists, could be seen as part of that cultural legacy. Everyone has an important story to tell.

**SOCIOLOGICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY GOES GLOBAL:  
SOCIOLOGISTS IN A GLOBAL AGE**

Mathieu Deflem's (2007: 1) edited collection, *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives*, bills itself as 'unique' in not only 'bringing together sociologists with distinctly international and/or contemporary perspectives' in their research, careers and life experiences, but also 'in gathering sociologists from across different parts of the world'. It is true that many previous collections of sociological autobiographies had been either exclusively, or at least predominantly, American in focus. The authors in this collection range from Germany, the Netherlands, Korea, China, Italy and Poland to the United Kingdom and the United States. The contributors include Martin Albrow, Diane E. Davis, Richard Münch, Ewa Morrawska, Piotr Sztompka, Eiko Igemi, Horst J. Helle and Edward Tiryakian. Surprisingly, two of the contributors in *Sociologists in a Global Age* also contributed autobiographical accounts to *The Disobedient Generation*: Karen Knorr Certina and Saskia Sassen. In one case, the text is almost identical.

The selection criteria for the volume are that each of the sociologists is 'well-known' and that they are 'exemplary practitioners of our discipline' (Deflem, 2007: 1). The pedagogic value of this was communicated to the authors: 'Authors were asked to be mindful to write essays that were especially useful for students of our discipline who are still in the process of developing their activities in the sociological enterprise' (p. 6). The editor also argues that the collection exemplifies current processes of globalization in its very fabric. Not only are many of these scholars inherently global individuals but the very internationalism of the project owes something to the globalization of communication and technology: 'The ease with which the internet and email communications have opened up the boundaries of national cultures has directly contributed to making the present volume possible' (p. 5). Search engines make biographical details available to global internet users, as do specialist sites such as SocioSite and Wikipedia.

The collection is simply too varied to do justice, in a review, to all these personal accounts. Instead, let me illustrate how the themes of globalization were dealt with in a few cases.

Knorr Certina's 'Going Global' is all the more fascinating because as a researcher in the sociology of scientific laboratories, financial networks and terrorism she is a renowned advocate of a 'micro' sociological approach. In short, she prefers her sociology to reflect upon processes that take place 'in situ'. Indeed, she is skeptical of the notion of a global personal identity because, by definition, globalization means the erasure of place, community and nation. Therefore, Knorr Certina's approach is to situate global processes in terms of agency and place, and to examine the 'particular experiences of individual persons that may develop as a global sense of belonging as they move through the islands of their various work and life settings' (2007: 31). The 'islands' of Knorr Certina's experience are quite distinct: growing up in

the Austrian lake district near Salzburg; studying at the University of Vienna; a year of research at Berkeley that was transformative; and subsequent positions at Bielefeld, Princeton, Konstanz and Chicago. These social worlds are moments both in her personal and professional life. She admits to a particular identification with one of these islands, Princeton, where not only did she experience the Institute for Advanced Studies as a 'transcendental place' for a scholar; she also came to feel that it allowed her the strategy of being a 'visitor'. She confesses to being 'less critical of Princeton' than some of her other islands of existence:

This is, I assume, because Princeton resolves many of the tensions between the global and the local by fostering global intercourse in a village setting. . . . If I find myself less critical of Princeton it is also because I have remained a visitor there. Those . . . stuck there for good do get bored, and look forward to taking their sabbaticals in grander places. Remaining a visitor can be a strategy of choice that complements one's commitment to a home institution. (Knorr Certina, 2007: 46)

The researcher as visitor also has unique insights into the cognitive, emotional and bodily deportment necessary in order to function in different places. Eiko Ikegami (2007) describes herself as a 'commuting scholar' who divides her time between a position at the New School for Social Research in New York and Kyoto, where she undertakes research on 'cultures of sociability' in Japan. After the hectic pace of Manhattan life, upon her arrival in Japan she quickly experiences the feeling that her 'internal gears begin to shift . . . [Kyoto] has the power to bring about a switch in my cultural mode of existence' (Ikegami, 2007: 203). For this scholar, having a transnational identity is not an 'abstract' or 'transcendental' idea; rather, it is a cognitive and 'felt' relationship produced by different physical locations. According to Ikegami, what is new about this experience is that contemporary humans are more able to maintain various 'home ports'. In the age of mass migration, it was difficult for 'cross-continental migrants' to preserve a lived connection to their country of origin. Whereas, only a few decades ago, a visit to one's homeland was 'often a "once in a lifetime" event', the advent of 'discount fares, inexpensive international telephone connections, and email' means that more and more migrants are morphing into commuters: 'one who can maintain a strong personal and professional foundation in more than one country' (Ikegami, 2007: 204). Ikegami adds that the 'sociologist is no exception' (p. 204). Her commuting life, as a sociologist, is used to contextualize her own work on Japanese modernity and cultural-aesthetic specificity of its public sphere (Ikegami, 1995, 2005).

In this respect, one of the more telling aspects of the testimonies collected in *Sociologists in a Global Age* is the different attitudes to movement across national and cultural boundaries by sociologists of different generations. Many of the senior, and therefore older, sociologists in the collection either went abroad to study or settled permanently in a new country. But

their recollections are significantly different to those of either Knorr Certina or Ikegami. For example, Edward Tiryakian's 'Have Sociological Passport, Will Travel' is, paradoxically, given the title of the memoir, a more conventional migrant narrative that recounts a successful 'assimilation' into American culture and academic life. Of Armenian background, and spending much of his early schooling in France, Tiryakian (2007: 242) remembers fondly the role that high school as an 'institution' played in his 'becoming an American'. Indeed, these life experiences shaped his own views of immigration as a sociologist and citizen, with the author claiming: 'my childhood experience with assimilation . . . makes me skeptical of those who advocate and seek to implement pluralism as a paramount value of the educational system' (p. 243).

A similar attitude to acculturation seems prevalent amongst some authors who credit spending time abroad as intellectually formative. These are the people who became symbolic interactionists or Parsonian as a result of going to America, just as a generation of humanists in the 1970s became deconstructionists, Lacanians or Althusserians as a result of pilgrimages to Paris. Piotr Sztompka, Ewa Moraswka and Horst J. Helle exemplify European sociologists for whom spending time in the United States led to intellectual 'conversions'. In this narrative, exposure to another national intellectual culture was transformative, in the same way that migration might lead, through immersion in a culture, to the adoption of a new identity. Arguably, these kinds of stories become less common with the passage of time. I would suggest that this is because, in contemporary academic culture, ideas circulate the globe more rapidly and academics routinely 'rub shoulders' with colleagues from different parts of the world at conferences and seminars. Émigré sociologists also find it easier to return home or – as in the case of Ikegawa – become 'commuters'. English is also rapidly becoming the *lingua franca* of academic life. The net effect is that ideas lose some of their national specificity. This globalization of academic life is simply more evident in some autobiographical accounts than in others in *Sociologists in the Global Age*.

#### **'THE EMOTIONAL COSTS OF GLOBALIZATION': BIOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE NEW INDIVIDUALISM**

One of Ferrarotti's more provocative suggestions in *On the Science of Uncertainty* is that biography becomes more rather than less important as a sociological method due to the advent of advanced capitalism. The logic is the following: under contemporary capitalism, 'major structural explanations . . . do not satisfy those to whom they are addressed' (Ferrarotti, 2005: 54). Rather than generalized accounts of social life, Ferrarotti contends that people want to understand their daily lives, the difficulties and contradictions that they encounter. What we need today is a 'science of mediations' that examines 'how social structures and dynamics create a dream, a failure, a psychosis, individual behavior, or a concrete relation between two individuals' (p. 54).

Paradoxically, biography may be best placed to act as a conduit for sociological reflection upon large-scale processes of change.

Doing 'macro' sociological theory through biography is one of the achievements of Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert's *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (2006). The central question of the book is how to account for the 'massive contradiction', in the authors' words, between the growing individualism of contemporary societies on one hand and the increasingly global realities faced by social actors on the other. Elliott and Lemert (2006: 5) admit that the culture of the new individualism, obsessed as it is with 're-making' and 're-fashioning' the person, expresses a certain 'egoism'; but they also believe that to dismiss this as mere 'narcissism' is simply 'too sweeping to capture the daily struggles of individuals in the contemporary West'.

So what is the link between biography and the new global realities? The conception of globalization here is one in which the traditional coordinates of personal identity are disembedded from place, nationhood and sense of social belonging. There is also the 'time-space compression' wrought by the process of electronic mass communication. Under these conditions, the relationship between 'private milieu' and 'public issues' that so concerned Mills is fundamentally altered and biography acquires a new significance. As such, the central focus of *The New Individualism* is 'how individuals respond – creatively, defensively and pathologically – to globalizing processes' (Elliott and Lemert, 2006: 5). Biography promises to revive debates about globalization, and remove it from mere 'sociological definitions of globalism', through its evocation of how individuals perceive these 'macro' processes: 'People's perceptions of a *global reality* have become increasingly important to the most emotionally felt, highly resonant, personal experience in which the textures of individualism are today fabricated' (p. 5).

The book adopts what it calls a 'focused psycho-social approach' to exploring the ways in which globalization and the new modernity impact personal experience. Such an approach is explicit about the importance of the 'emotions' to these transformations: 'Through this concentration on individuals and their imagined worlds we seek to come to a better understanding of how global transformations, shape, and are shaped by, human emotions' (Elliott and Lemert, 2006: 14). The authors draw on interviews, informal discussions and other materials such as reports in the media. They use these to reconstruct detailed biographies and to capture global conditions from 'the individual's point of view' (p. 14). *The New Individualism* is also innovative in using family members (an empirical method that stretches back to Freud and Cooley), the lives and autobiographical accounts of sociologist themselves, and – in what might be more controversial – a fictionalized 'case-history' approach where some aspects of the account were reconstructed in order to ensure anonymity' but also to 'dramatize and invent certain aspects of characters in the pages of this book' (p. 14). The debate regarding whether

fictional materials can aid sociological reflection is a long-standing one. As Carla Capetti (1993) has demonstrated, the first generation of the Chicago School not only taught some of the greatest exponents of American urban literature (Wright, Farrell and Algren), they also advocated using literary narratives to teach and do research on aspects of city life. However, the blurring of fictional and empirical biographies is still unusual in sociology.

The cast of characters in *The New Individualism* includes: Caoimhe and Annie (the young daughters of each author); Larry, a high-tech businessman in his late 40s; Joe and Xavier, two lovers who dedicate themselves to 'what is in' and angst about where they should be; Ruth, a married woman in her late 50s for whom cyber-sex is an important past time; and Norman, who is HIV positive and a recovering drug addict. These characters appear, for the main part, in chapters devoted to specific topics, such as 'global space', the 'good society', 'coping with globalization', 'intimacy and eroticism', 'multi-culturalism' and 'surviving the new individualism'. 'Notes on the Selected Individuals' appears as an appendix to the book. But the fact that these characters are deployed to flesh out sociological concepts about globalization raises the question: to what extent are these biographies applied taxonomically? On the whole, the individual biographies are developed in sufficient detail to allow them to develop as individual characters. However, as the book involves biography, as reconstructed by the sociologist, rather than autobiography, as authored by the subject, it is inevitable that some degree of typology creeps into the accounts. For example, Larry is presented in the analysis of 'Living in a Privatized World' as involving an 'experience of work . . . in which his exposure to the worldwide stretching of economic flows and technological interactions is high' but where control over personal identity is paramount (Elliott and Lemert, 2006: 104). They refer to this as 'diffused globalization' and compare it to lives of those who experience globality 'thickly': that is, where the impact of globalizing forces involves a 'narrative of unpredictable work moves and shifts' and where erotic, intimate and emotional relationships mirror this intensity (p. 105). Perhaps there is no getting around the fact that the sociological gaze has to aim for some degree of generality. In any case, many of the analytic points, such as the contrast between 'diffused' and 'thick' globalization, are well made; and the level of generalization is, on the whole, less than that practised by many sociological theorists.

An intriguing analytic strategy pursued by Elliott and Lemert is the elision of the boundary between sociological and everyday biography. They claim that Mills is sociologically interesting not just 'for his ideas as for his way of living which, in many ways, illustrates both the promise and the tragedy of the new individualism' (2006: 183). They see Mills' self-styled radicalism, evident in everything from his iconoclastic academic persona and sociological writings (*White Collar* and *The Power Elite*) to his support for Castro's Cuba and his building of three houses and one BMW motorcycle, as representing an attempt to come to grips with 'new individualism' (see also his

own reflections: Mills, 2000). They also take his untimely death, at the age of 46, as a sign of the perils associated with the uncoupling of character and social structure: 'Mills was nothing if not a man (too much of a man perhaps) who lived with an objective eye on global realities. . . . Yet he did not survive either the global realities or his own masculinist style of individualism' (Elliott and Lemert, 2006: 185).

This is an interesting re-reading of Mills. We are more accustomed to seeing him as contemporaneous with mid-20th-century critiques of 'manipulated individualism' and 'isolated privatism' than with notions of 'reflexive individualization': C. Wright Mills as a victim of the Cold War and 1950s conformism. But it is the mismatch between identity and social structure that the authors are trying to highlight, and in this respect Mills' biography exemplifies the problems associated with 'surviving the new individualism' as much as the narratives of the non-sociological characters in the book. In blurring the genres of sociological and empirical biography, Elliott and Lemert also remind us that there are both similarities and differences between the lives of sociologists and other social actors. Sociologists are in the privileged position of reflecting, analysing, researching and writing upon society; but they are also part of what they are describing. In this respect, sociological biographies are also exemplary.

## CONCLUSION

We live in a period more attentive to individual narratives and more suspicious of overarching explanations. There is no single cause for this, although the cultural transformation wreaked by the '60s and the advent of globalization, with its disembedding of personal identity, have been advanced as two reasons. All of the books reviewed here share the assumption that there is sociological value in autobiography and biography, and that what at first appears personal is hardly ever entirely private. The allure of the personal is that it captures something about a period, a social group or a society. Only, as many of its defenders claim, it does so more concretely than abstract social categories. It is hard to see, given the current flowering of the biographical method across genres as different as the autobiography of academic sociologists and the study of globalization, the interest in personal narratives waning any time soon.

**Eduardo de la Fuente** teaches in the Communications and Media Studies program in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University. Since 2005 he has been a Faculty Fellow of the Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, and Co-Convenor of the TASA Cultural Sociology Thematic Group. He has published articles on the sociology of art and culture, romanticism and sociology, and has a forthcoming monograph (Routledge) on 20th-century music and the question of cultural modernity. [email: Eduardo.delaFuente@arts.monash.edu.au]

## References

- Bell, Daniel (1976) *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Berger, Bennett M. (ed.) (1990) *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Biographies by Twenty American Sociologists*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Calhoun, Craig (2005) 'My Back Pages', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. 72–93. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Capetti, Carla (1993) *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chase, Susan E. (2005) 'Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices', in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd edn*, pp. 651–79. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Collins, Randall (1986) 'The Passing of Intellectual Generations: Reflections on the Death of Erving Goffman', *Sociological Theory* 4: 106–13.
- Coser, Lewis (1977) *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context, 2nd edn*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Coser, Lewis (1993) 'A Sociologist's Atypical Life', *Annual Review of Sociology* 19: 1–15.
- Deflem, Mathieu (2007) 'Introduction: Sociologists in a Global Age', in Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives*, pp. 1–14. London: Ashgate.
- Elliott, Anthony and Lemert, Charles (2006) *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*. London: Routledge.
- Ferrarotti, Franco (2005) *On the Science of Uncertainty: The Biographical Method in Social Research*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Gouldner, Alvin W. (1970) *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gouldner, Alvin W. (1973) *For Sociology: Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today*. London: Allen Lane.
- Horowitz, Irving Louis (ed.) (1969) *Sociological Self-Images: A Collective Portrait*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Jedlowski, Paolo (2005) 'Becoming a Sociologist in Italy', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. 141–55. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Knorr Certina, Karin (2005) 'Culture of Life', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. 176–95. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Knorr Certina, Karin (2007) 'Going Global', in Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives*, pp. 29–49. London: Ashgate.
- Ikegami, Eiko (1995) *Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ikegami, Eiko (2005) *Bonds of Civility: Aesthetic Networks and the Political Origins of Japanese Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ikegami, Eiko (2007) 'My Sociological Practices and Commuting Identities', in Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives*, pp. 203–18. London: Ashgate.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F. (1969) 'An Episode in the History of Social Research: A Memoir', in Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (eds) *The Intellectual Migration: Europe and America, 1930–1960*, pp. 270–337. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

- Merton, Robert K. (1996) 'A Life of Learning', in Piotr Sztompka (ed.) *On Social Structure and Science*, pp. 339–59. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mills, C. Wright (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mills, C. Wright (2000) *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (ed. Kathryn and Pamela Mills). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pampel, Fred C. (2000) *Sociological Lives and Ideas: An Introduction to the Classical Theorists*. New York: Worth.
- Park, Robert Ezra (1950) 'An Autobiographical Note', in *Race and Culture*, pp. v–ix. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Sica, Alan (2005) 'Introduction: What Has 1968 Come to Mean?', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. 1–19. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sica, Alan and Stephen Turner (2005) 'Preface', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. ix–xiv. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Shils, Edward (2006) *A Fragment of a Sociological Autobiography: The History of My Pursuit of a Few Ideas*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Sorokin, Pitirim A. (1963) *A Long Journey: The Autobiography of Pitirim Sorokin*. New Haven, CT: College and University Press.
- Thomas, William Isaac and Znaniecki, Florian (1927) *The Polish Peasant in America and Europe, Vol. 2*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Tiryakian, Edward A. (2007) 'Have Sociological Passport, Will Travel', in Mathieu Deflem (ed.) *Sociologists in a Global Age: Biographical Perspectives*, pp. 239–64. London: Ashgate.
- Turner, Bryan (2005) 'The 1968 Student Revolts: The Expressive Revolution and Generational Politics', in Alan Sica and Stephen Turner (eds) *The Disobedient Generation: Social Theorists in the Sixties*, pp. 272–84. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, Max (1976) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. T. Parsons). London: Allen and Unwin.