

Social History and the Study of
“Great Men”? The *Hispanic American
Historical Review*, William Spence
Robertson (1872-1956), and the
Disciplinary Debate about Biography

¿La historia social y el estudio de los “Grandes
Hombres”? La *Hispanic American Historical
Review*, William Spence Robertson (1872-1956)
y el debate disciplinar sobre la biografía

*A história social e o estudo dos “Grandes
Homens”? A Hispanic American Historical
Review, William Spence Robertson (1872-1956)
e o debate disciplinar sobre a biografia*

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social history in the sixties sparked heated debate while rejecting biography on behalf of a deeper forms of explanation, especially in the socio-economic realm (base) conceptualized in structural and systemic terms. This article will test the accuracy of social history's criticism of the U.S. scholarly community associated with *Hispanic American Historical Review* —*HAHR*— from its formative years (1910-1920) through its consolidation in the forties. It does so by examining the historical scholarship of William Spence Robertson, a *HAHR* founder who wrote authoritative biographical monographs on Francisco de Miranda (1929) and Mexico's Iturbide (1952). While offering an interpretation of *HAHR* as a U.S. disciplinary journal, it asks if Robertson's professional production is best understood as an expression of a prevailing "great man theory of history" while exploring the evolving reception of his work at mid-century. It ends by offering a critique of the theoretical underpinnings of the anti-biographical disposition of so many historians even today and explores how it derives from a combination of certain formulations of Marxism with structuralist, and post-structuralist doxa.

Keywords: history, United States, biography, social history, historiography, Latin America.

RESUMEN

El auge de la historia social de los años sesenta provocó un acalorado debate, al tiempo que rechazó la biografía a favor de formas más profundas de explicación, especialmente en el ámbito socioeconómico (base), conceptualizadas en términos estructurales y sistémicos. Este artículo pondrá a prueba la exactitud de la crítica de la historia social de la comunidad académica de los Estados Unidos asociada con la Hispanic American Historical Review —HAHR— desde sus años de formación (1910-1920) hasta su consolidación en los años cuarenta. Este lo hace mediante el examen del trabajo académico histórico de William Spence Robertson, uno de los fundadores de la HAHR, quien escribió importantes monografías biográficas sobre Francisco de Miranda (1929) e Iturbide de México (1952). Al tiempo que se ofrece una interpretación de la HAHR como una revista disciplinaria de los Estados Unidos, se indaga si la producción profesional de Robertson se entiende mejor como una expresión de una teoría de “gran hombre de la historia”, mientras explora la recepción cambiante de su trabajo en la mitad del siglo. El texto termina ofreciendo una crítica de los fundamentos teóricos de la disposición antibiográfica de muchos historiadores hasta hoy en día, y explora cómo se deriva de una combinación de ciertas formulaciones del marxismo con doxa estructuralista y postestructuralista.

Palabras clave: *historia, Estados Unidos, biografía, historia social, historiografía, América Latina.*

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RESUMO

O auge da história social dos anos 1960 provocou um acalorado debate, ao mesmo tempo em que rejeitou a biografia a favor de formas mais profundas de explicação, especialmente no âmbito socioeconômico (base), conceitualizadas em termos estruturais e sistêmicos. Este artigo colocará à prova a exatidão da crítica da história social da comunidade acadêmica dos Estados Unidos associada com a Hispanic American Historical Review —HAHR— desde seus anos de formação (1910-1920) até sua consolidação nos anos 1940. Isso se faz mediante o exame do trabalho acadêmico histórico de William Spence Robertson, um dos fundadores da HAHR, que escreveu importantes monografias biográficas sobre Francisco de Miranda (1929) e Iturbide do México (1952). Paralelamente, oferece-se uma interpretação da HAHR como uma revista disciplinar dos Estados Unidos, indaga-se se a produção profissional de Robertson se entende melhor como uma expressão de uma teoria de “grande homem da história”, enquanto explora a recepção cambiante de seu trabalho na metade do século. O texto termina oferecendo uma crítica dos fundamentos teóricos da disposição antibiográfica de muitos historiadores até hoje em dia e explora como se deriva de uma combinação de certas formulações do marxismo com doxa estruturalista e pós-estruturalista.

Palavras-chave: *história, Estados Unidos, biografia, história social, historiografia, América Latina.*

As a community of craftsmen, historians are likely to address epistemology and method only at moments of intellectual insurgency that portend a rupture within the discipline. Thus, the rise of social history in the sixties—a decade that saw the founding of the *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*—sparked heated debate while the prevailing forms of social history were themselves challenged, two decades later, by the linguistic turn, post-structuralism, and the rise of cultural history. When heightened disagreement is perceived to threaten disciplinary hierarchies, combatants inevitably emphasize that history too has a history, whether to defend hard won achievements or to excoriate past failings. At such points, they gesture towards the 19th century consolidation of history as a profession when it distinguished itself through an insistence on the scientific method (archival-based research and rules of evidence) and an ideal of disinterestedness if not objectivity. As Mauricio Archila Neira noted in 1999, historians have always contrasted professional history's "destreza empírica a la especulación histórica," often in bad faith, of its predecessors.¹ Voltaire was wrong, in other words, when he suggested that the writing of history was little more than "a pack of tricks we play on the dead."² True history, the professionals insist, is more than simply present politics past.

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It is in this spirit that one can better understand biography's uncomfortable fit within social history's constitutive DNA—Deoxyribo Nucleic Acid—. Responding to the linguistic turn, Mauricio Archila Neira reminded readers in 1999 that social historians—he specifically cited the project of *Annales* group in the twenties—preceded cultural historians in challenging the discipline's positivist and scientific self-definition (universal laws, exaggerated claims of objectivity, etc.).³ In passing, he also noted social history's "distance from, if not frank rejection" of the political (a characteristic carried over to cultural history). In a brief comment, he linked this posture to the field's "rupture with the inclination of the nineteenth century founders of the discipline to write the histories of great."⁴ Although cited indirectly,

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1. Mauricio Archila, "Es aún posible la búsqueda de la verdad? Notas sobre la (nueva) historia cultural," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 26 (1999): 258.
 2. Voltaire "1757 Letter by Voltaire (Francois Marie Arouet) to Pierre Robert Le Cornier de Cideville," *Voltaire's Correspondence*, vol. 31, ed. Theodore Besterman (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1958) 47.
 3. Archila Neira, "Es Aún Posible..." 257-258.
 4. Archila Neira, "Es Aún Posible..." 258. Translation by the author.

Archila thus invoked the famous 1840 essay by Thomas Carlyle in which the Scottish polymath declared that that “the History of the World was the Biography of Great Men.”

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They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history.⁵

As Archila suggests, the social history explosion of the sixties and seventies was indeed fueled by the repudiation of an elitist and state-centric history that too often seemed a tale of the Great Thoughts and Great Deeds of Great [White] Men. Envisioning itself as speaking “truth to power,” social history’s strident call to arms — “history from the bottom up” — demanded space in the history books for the mass of humanity not simply the wealthy, well-born, and well-educated. It also challenging established narrative forms and decried an excessive attention to events in the upper reaches of society (the superstructure). Most substantively, history’s subversive upstart demanded a search for deeper forms of explanation, especially in the socio-economic realm (base) conceptualized in structural and systemic terms.

This article will test the accuracy of social history’s criticism of the U.S. scholarly community associated with *Hispanic American Historical Review* — *HAHR* — from its formative years (1910-1920) through its consolidation in the forties. While offering a new interpretation of the *HAHR* project, the article explores the nature of the historical scholarship of William Spence Robertson (1872-1955), a *HAHR* founder who wrote authoritative biographical monographs on Francisco de Miranda (1929) and Mexico’s Iturbide (1952). While offering an interpretation of *HAHR* as a U.S. disciplinary journal, it asks if Robertson’s professional production is best understood as an expression of a prevailing “great man theory of history.” It then explores the evolving reception he received from his colleagues as the profession began

5. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840) 102-103. The irony, of course, is that Carlyle was not a “professional historian” and this celebrated essay was an attack on the intellectual trends that were birthing history as an academic discipline, which he deplored.

to shift its emphasis after 1930, changes that became hegemonic after 1945 in the treatment of the independence era. Adding considerable nuance to the social history indictment of biographies of historical personalities, it argues that the Anglophone social history sub-field that emerged with such force in the sixties was in fact grounded in scholarly trends going back two decades earlier.

The final section offers a critique of the theoretical underpinnings of the anti-biographical disposition of so many historians. It explores how this posture derived in part from a less salutary dimension of certain formulations of Marxism and a practice, by no means superseded today, of objectivist social science. Even cultural history, which superseded social history in prominence, was characterized by an anti-biographical reflex derived from structuralist, and post-structuralist doxa, such as "the death of the subject," that are due for critique. Drawing on my own research, it argues for a new theoretical engagement with the problems of biography and the "acting subject" with which Jean Paul Sartre was engaged in the late fifties and early sixties. Established on new foundations, biographical approaches can be powerful tools for social and cultural historians, whether dealing with rank-and-file leaders of subaltern groups or historical personalities of the first order like Brazil's trade unionist-turned President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. It ends with a final reflection about what we share, across subfield divisions, as practitioners of a shared craft.

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Great historians, great men, and the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1918-1949

Over ninety-five years, the *Hispanic American Historical Review*⁶ has offered a useful point of entry for exploring the key issues confronted by history professionals as they grappled with questions of evidence, method, and theory in the field of Latin American history. The two men who initiated the founding of *HAHR* were represented in the journal's first issue in February 1918. The University of California professor Charles E. Chapman

6. The first issue of the *Hispanic American Historical Review* —*HAHR*— appeared in February 1918 but ceased publication in November 1922. The reestablishment of *HAHR* in 1926 was also linked to the founding in 1928 of an independent professional association, the Conference on Latin American History, an affiliate of the American Historical Association, with which *HAHR* is associated, Howard F. Cline, ed., *Latin American History. Essays on its study and teaching, 1898-1965*, vol. 2 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967) 120-122.

(1880-1941) contributed a piece on “The Institutional Background to Spanish American History” while William S. Robertson, a long time professor at the University of Illinois (1909-1941), addressed “The Recognition of the Spanish Colonies by the Motherland.” Although their profiles were quite distinct, both had co-signed an October 1916 appeal to found a Latin American history journal. Only Robertson was a biographer, with a specialization in the diplomacy and historical personalities of the Independence era. By contrast, Chapman wrote a great deal on colonial Hispanic California—which befitted his institutional setting— while authoring books for the general public about Spain and Latin America as well as a 1927 volume on Cuba aligned with u.s. foreign policy.⁷

The subsequent trajectory of their scholarly reputations also diverged. Only Robertson was listed in both history-of-the-field reviews in the fifties as among the four key historians in the formative decades from 1900 to 1920.⁸ The 1957 article that did mention Chapman described his 1933 colonial survey as “still, despite some peculiarities, far from a worthless book.”⁹ Eleven years before Chapman, Robertson had also written a textbook—one of the first two in the field— but his enduring reputation rests on a two volume Miranda biography still recognized as definitive three quarter of a century after its publication in 1929.¹⁰ As David Bushnell suggested in 2006, “the very breadth of Robertson’s study may well have been a disincentive to other scholars who might have been tempted to work on the same to-

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7. A far less influential historian than Robertson, Charles E. Chapman was the author of *A History of the Cuban Republic, a Study in Hispanic American Politics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927) that was funded by the Carnegie Foundation at the suggestion of the u.s. ambassador to Cuba. Mark T. Berger, *Under Northern Eyes: Latin American Studies and US Hegemony in the Americas, 1898-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 258.
 8. William S. Robertson but not Chapman was listed by Clifton B. Kroeber, “La tradición de la historia Latinoamericana en los Estados Unidos: apreciación preliminar,” *Revista de Historia de América* 35-36 (Jan.-Dec., 1953): 32, while Chapman was listed along with Robertson in Charles Gibson and Benjamin Keen, “Trends of United States Studies in Latin American History,” *American Historical Review* 62. 4 (jul., 1957): 855.
 9. Gibson and Keen 861.
 10. William Spence Robertson, *The Life of Miranda*. 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1930).

pic.”¹¹ Writing about biographies of liberators in 1956, R. A. Humphreys ranked *The Life of Miranda* with Bartolomé Mitre’s famous biographies of San Martín and Belgrano as “historiographical milestones” in the study of the independence era.¹²

A good number of documents regarding the founding of *HAHR* are available for consultation in the second volume of *Latin American History: Essays on its Study and Teaching, 1898-1965*, published in 1967 by the Conference on Latin American History. During its first years, *HAHR*’s viability was an open question given its financial fragility and lack of institutional support, with no more than a few hundred subscribers at best. Its initial run was made possible by the ongoing support of a Spanish-born California businessman but the journal was suspended in 1922 when his affairs entered into crisis. It reappeared four years later with the same editor, James Alexander Robertson (1873-1939), a scholar-bibliographer with experience in the Philippines who was employed by the government in Washington D.C. The journal’s rebirth was made possible by a dependable subsidy offered by Duke, a newly founded southern institution of higher education located in Durham, North Carolina that grew out of a large 1924 donation from the tobacco and electric power magnate James B. Duke.¹³ Unlike established schools such as Harvard and Yale, Duke and its newly founded press seized what they saw as an opportunity to achieve prestige and distinction, even

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11. David Bushnell, “Francisco de Miranda and the United States: The Venezuelan Precursor and the Precursor Republic,” *Francisco de Miranda: Exile and Enlightenment*, ed. John Maher (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2006) 7; elsewhere in the same volume, the book is described by Malcom Deas as “still worth reading” (“Some Reflections on Miranda as Solider” 77).
 12. R. A. Humphreys, “The Historiography of Spanish American revolutions,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 36.1 (Feb., 1956): 89.
 13. The troubled early history of *HAHR* is detailed in a thorough archive-based master’s thesis in 1948 by Felicia Miller, “James Alexander Robertson and the Hispanic American Historical Review: Its Founding and Early Years”, Masters of Arts thesis (George Washington University, 1948), 25, 32, 40, 91-99. Additional information on subsequent decades can be found in a less deeply researched thesis by Andrea Lundeberg Ross, “A History of the Duke University Press and Its Three Humanities Journals: American Literature, the Hispanic American Historical Review, and the South Atlantic Quarterly”, Master’s Thesis in Library Science (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1967).

if in a new and less competitive field of scholarly endeavor; the leaders of the University of California, which was the pioneer doctoral training in Latin American history, at the time, felt they had already invested enough resources in its success.

[108] After its first decade, *HAHR* established itself on a firmer foundation with an ongoing link to Duke University Press and the substantial institutional support provided by the universities across the country who sponsor its editorial team for five year terms.¹⁴ In the words of Gibson and Keen (1957), *HAHR*'s first task had been to establish "Hispanic American history as an autochthonous entity, disciplining its method, and educating the historical profession to regard it seriously." It was able to do so because of the "enthusiasm aroused by the discovery and demarcation of a new historical field" on the part of an inter-war cohort of newly trained Latin Americanist historians.¹⁵ By 1941, *HAHR* had passed into the black for the first time—with some later but not threatening deficits—and those involved could be proud that "neither in scope nor in character was there at that time another periodical of this type in either the Old World or the New," as William Spence Robertson observed looking backward in 1950.¹⁶

HAHR's mission from the outset was to study "the history (...) and institutions of Spain, Portugal, and the Latin American states" (it never did much with Iberian history). The same statement of objectives also broke up the historical field into five sub-areas: "(...) political, economic, social and diplomatic, as well as narrative."¹⁷ When the modern Mexicanist Lesley Bird Simpson prepared a survey of *HAHR*'s first thirty years, he created better categories to classify its research articles. His 1948 article revealed that bio-

14. *HAHR* continues to be published at a high level of excellence by Duke University Press while its editorial operations are supported by course releases and financial support from whichever university is awarded the editorship for a five year term. The expense to the sponsoring university is considerable and the current editorial team based at Duke—myself, Pete Sigal, Jolie Olcott, Sean Mannion, and Cynthia Radding—gratefully acknowledge the far-sighted support offered by Duke Arts and Sciences Dean Laurie L. Patton for 2013-2018.

15. Gibson and Keen 855, 859.

16. Quoted from Cline 121. The oldest Latin Americanist counterpart might be the *Revista de Indias*, founded in Spain in 1940 and still published, although it is not restricted to history like *HAHR*. In 1944, *The Americas* joined *HAHR* as a Latin American-wide English language historical journal with support from the American Academy of Franciscan History.

17. Quoted from Cline 112.

graphy was in fact the second most common item (16%), but only slightly ahead of articles he classified as "economic" (13%) and social (12%), followed by institutional (10%), military (8%), and geographic history (8%) with the remaining 2% historiographical. By far, the single largest research specialization was diplomatic history (28%) and Simpson registered his generation's discontent with the "extraordinary prominence" *HAHR* had given to the "correspondence and quarrels of diplomats and state departments," although he emphasized that he had "no quarrel, in principle, with the relatively heavy stress given to biography."¹⁸

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In other words, the biography of heroes was not in fact dominant in the specialized disciplinary community that *HAHR* cohered and fostered. If there was a "great man" fixation, U.S. scholars were apparently more focused on the less heroic routines of clerks and functionaries rather than the warriors and statesman that drew so much of the attention in Spanish American and Brazilian historical writing up to that point. Chronologically, the field through 1948 was still overwhelmingly focused on the colonial period, although unevenly so. And though it may seem surprising, the independence era itself had been "relatively unattractive to (U.S.) historians until the twentieth century."¹⁹

Looking back before 1900, Latin America was overwhelmingly viewed in the United States as an extension of Spain, a country conceived as the antithesis of the United States (what Kagan has called the "Prescott paradigm").²⁰ It was "Hispanism" that best described the enterprise—involving language, history, and culture—and the field both expressed and contested the country's Anglo-Protestant prejudices. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a vector of intellectual change could be found in regional Anglo

18. Book reviews, documents, obituaries, notices, and bibliographies were ignored in the count. Lesley Byrd Simpson, "Thirty years of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 29.2 (May, 1949): 193-196.

19. Gibson and Keen 855. The immense prejudice among U.S. observers towards the political "chaos" and "anarchy" that followed independence explains the lack of priority given to post-independence Latin America, a feature of the U.S. Latin Americanist field that would come to be much criticized in the late forties and mid-fifties.

20. Richard L. Kagan, "Prescott's Paradigm: American Historical Scholarship and the Decline of Spain," *The American Historical Review* 101.2 (Apr., 1996): 423-446. See also his edited volume *Spain in America: The Origins of Hispanism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

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elites in the western territories acquired by the U.S. in its war on Mexico in 1846-1848. Especially in the state where Chapman taught, Californians disputed with easterners for space within the nation through devotion to the amateur and, eventually, professional study of their own “ancient” regional history under Spain. With the founding of *HAHR*, however, the field shifted decisively “from a borderland to an exclusively Latin American” focus; no longer was Spanish America of primary interest as a precursor.²¹

Yet the scholarly activism of *HAHR* founders also reflected the opportunities offered by the “shift from Anglo-Saxonism to Pan Americanism” in U.S. diplomatic and intellectual affairs.²² With the acquisition of Caribbean colonies in 1898, the U.S. strove to realize its earlier ambition to establish a de facto protectorate over the region in competition with European powers, especially England and Germany. U.S. foreign policy came to combine “dollar diplomacy” and military interventionism with a Pan Americanism designed to hasten the flow of capital, goods and knowledge within the Americas.²³ As the U.S. emerged as a regional hegemon (even if only, initially, in Central America and the Caribbean), the focus of intellectual energy shifted towards the hemisphere’s Iberian American countries. This was accompanied by a new Pan American rhetoric about establishing “greater mutual understanding between the two Americas,” in the words of a resolution that Charles Chapman introduced at a July 1916 Buenos Aires meeting that called for the establishment of “a Latin American review of a bibliographical nature.”²⁴

21. Gibson and Keen 859.

22. The phrase is from Berger 63.

23. Ricardo D. Salvatore has recently published empirically rich work on this topic: “Library Accumulation and the Emergence of Latin American Studies,” *Comparative American Studies* 3.4 (2005): 415-436; “The Making of a Hemispheric Intellectual—Statesman: Leo S. Rowe in Argentina (1906-1919),” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1 (2010): 1-36; and *Imágenes de un Imperio: Estados Unidos y las formas de representación de América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2006).

24. Charles E. Chapman, *A Californian in South America; a Report on the Visit of Professor Charles Edward Chapman of the University of California to South America Upon the Occasion of the American Congress of Bibliography and History Held at Buenos Aires in July, 1916, in Commemoration of the Declaration of Independence of the Argentine Republic, July 9, 1816* (Berkeley: Lederer, Street & Zeus Co., 1917) 11. *HAHR* would emerge in a series of meetings at the American Historical Association —AHA— over the following two years.

In 1896, domestic criticism of U.S. expansion in Latin America had been vigorously attacked as "anti-American" by the Anglo-Saxon ideologue Teddy Roosevelt. Twenty years later, there was an urgent need for a smoother exercise of U.S. influence given the powerful negative reactions in the region after Panama and a series of Marine occupations. Thus space was created for precisely the timid men President Roosevelt had attacked: men who failed to value "the great fighting qualities without which no nation can ever rise to the first rank," men whose education "tended to make them over cultivated and oversensitive to foreign opinion."²⁵ In their role as "North American cultural mediators," scholar entrepreneurs like *HAHR*'s founders found a unifying discourse in the shared enterprise of knowledge.²⁶ As James Robertson wrote to a Latin American colleague:

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Our great object is to create a bond of union of the intellect between scholars all over the American continent (...). We want to interpret your country to ours. We need to know more about the greatness of your country, your ideals, *your great men*. We want our people to feel proud of you as Americans, and we want you to feel proud of us as Americans (emphasis added).²⁷

Having already rejected the "Black Legend" about Spain, these scholars were proud of having transcended their U.S. predecessor's "nationalist or religious prejudices."²⁸ Even the willingness to grant that there might in fact be "great men" in Latin America contrasted sharply with the negative images that characterized the views of U.S. statesman and travelers a century earlier, even when dealing with Bolívar.²⁹ Aiming to create common ground across the Anglo/Iberian divide, they now emphasized shared liberal

25. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Bachelor of Arts* (Mar., 1896.) *Mem. Ed.* 15, 235; *Nat. Ed.* 13, 177.

26. Salvatore, *Imágenes de un imperio* 178.

27. Letter from James A. Robertson to Adolfo Tornquist, March 18, 1919, cited in Miller, "James Alexander Robertson..." 78.

28. Kroeber 43-44.

29. See Lars Schoultz, *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* (United States of America: Harvard University Press, 1998) 1-13 and the shockingly hostile profile of Simón Bolívar offered by a U.S. envoy that met him around the time of the Angostura Congress: Lewis Hanke, "Baptist Irvine's reports on Simón Bolívar," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 16.3 (Aug., 1936): 360-373.

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and republican values, however disappointing they thought the subsequent results had been in most of the region (Argentina and Chile were viewed more favorably, as nations apart). This inspired Robertson to write a book in 1918 to “furnish to English readers an outline” of the independence movement through the story of “four great personages of the South American Revolution.”³⁰ Or one might cite Chapman’s 1933 colonial textbook which approvingly quoted Mitre’s judgment that Simon Bolívar and San Martín were, “according to the measure of their opportunities (*en su medida*), the greatest men, after [George] Washington, that America has produced, worthy of figuring in the universal pantheon as collaborators in human progress” (Carlyle redux).³¹

Their new Pan American “mission” heightened the travel opportunities open to scholars like Chapman and Robertson, which allowed them to become personally familiar with the historians, libraries, and archives of the countries they visited. In 1916, both men made extended trips in South America before meeting up in Buenos Aires on the centenary of the viceroyalty of La Plata’s Declaration of Independence. They participated as representatives of their respective universities in an American Congress of Bibliography and History attended by 225 delegates, including national delegations from Spain and ten Latin American countries including Colombia.³² In his October 1916 published report, Chapman described those in attendance as including “not only historians proper, but also bibliographers, librarians, teachers, and men who were none of these,” but who were “interested in the subject matter.”³³ His comment reflected the fact that the local historical communities in Latin America were not university-based as had become the norm by 1900 in the United States. For their Latin American hosts, the presence of U.S.

30. William Spence Robertson, *Rise of the Spanish-American Republics as Told in the Lives of Their Liberators* (New York / London: D. Appleton and Company, 1918) 9-10.

31. Charles E. Chapman, *Colonial Hispanic America: A History* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933) 379.

32. The national delegations hailed from Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, San Salvador, Spain, and Uruguay.

33. Cline, 112. The reference to “history proper” established common terrain with at least some of his Argentine colleagues in attendance at the meeting who were working to professionalize history-writing in that country, Joseph R. Barager, “The Historiography of the Río de La Plata Area since 1830,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 39.4 (Nov., 1959): 601-602.

historians affirmed the status as colleagues while opening a window onto an emerging inter- and supra-national professional community that some, but not all, might find congenial.

Chapman's speeches in Buenos Aires not only hailed the "fervent patriotism and warlike valor" of Argentina's founders but also exalted the "learned" greatness of his U.S. colleague Robertson, who arrived towards the end of gathering. Chapman boasted that Dr. William S. Robertson, was "one of our notable [U.S.] historians" citing the fact that his 1903 doctoral thesis on Miranda was awarded a coveted prize by the American Historical Association.³⁴ His high estimation of Robertson's stature was by no means mistaken. Born in Scotland, Robertson arrived at the age of eight in Wisconsin before going on to receive his B.A. and Masters at the University of Wisconsin (1899-1900) under the famous U.S. historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932).³⁵ Author most famously of the "frontier thesis," Turner was an advocate of the "new history" who became President of the American Historical Association in 1910 and later moved on to Harvard. When a ten-chapter volume was put together in his honor in 1910, his former student Robertson was one of two contributors who wrote on Latin America.³⁶

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Having been publicized in Buenos Aires, Robertson's *Francisco de Miranda and the Revolutionizing of Spanish America* would appear in Spanish translation two years later published by the Academia Colombiana de Historia.³⁷ Its translator Diego Mendoza Pérez aptly characterized the book:

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34. Chapman, *A Californian in South* 20, 7, 12; William Spence, Robertson *Francisco De Miranda and the Revolutionizing of Spanish America. Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909).
35. R. A. Humphreys, "William Spence Robertson 1872-1955," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 36.2 (May, 1956): 263-267.
36. William Spence Robertson, "The Beginnings of Spanish-American Diplomacy," *Essays in American History, Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Guy Stanton Ford (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1910), 231-267. The other contribution on Latin America was by a senior Wisconsin Law Professor who was not, however, a specialist in the region; the other eight chapters were on U.S. history.
37. Founded in 1902, the Academia was a Government-linked entity that gathered together what a later Colombian historian would call the "caballeros andantes del patriotismo" (Mauricio Archila, "La disciplina histórica en la Universidad Nacional, sede Bogotá," *Cuatro décadas de compromiso académico en la construcción de la nación*, eds. Mauricio Archila, Francois Correa, Ovidio

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“of the various fundamental modes of conceiving and writing history, as science or as art, the American professor has resolutely adopted the scientific. The monograph (...) is meticulously analytical.”³⁸ Robertson and the new field of Latin American history, it should be emphasized, were part of the revolution in scholarship that accompanied the emergence of the modern research university in the U.S. “History proper” was now distinguished from other types of histories on the basis of its new scientific vocation. It had only been in 1882, twenty one years before Robertson received his degree, that the first two U.S. doctoral degrees in history were granted by Johns Hopkins and Yale (Robertson’s alma mater).³⁹ As detailed in Peter Novick’s masterful account, the transformation that followed was decisive as the discipline of history quickly acquired the key traits of a profession: “institutional apparatus (an association, a learned journal), standardized training in esoteric skills leading to certification and controlled access to practice, heightened status, [and] autonomy.”⁴⁰

Robertson was a quintessential representative of this late 19th century conception of “history as science,” in both its strengths and weaknesses. While “sympathy” for historical actors could be avowed, Robertson wrote in his 1918 book, it was essential to avoid “any conscious *parti-pris*.”⁴¹ The goal was to exhaust the archives, establish the facts, and balance rival interpretations in order to establish what actually happened (a rhetoric derived from Ranke). The new professionals did so armed, in Novick’s words, with “a dazzling array of refined and esoteric techniques for ferreting out and verifying the historical fact.” While “technique was important,” even more valued was “rigor, assiduity in research, and an infinite capacity for the most painstaking and arduous pursuit of the fact. Their ideal was the man who would ‘cross an ocean to verify a comma.’”⁴²

Delgado y Jaime E. Jaramillo (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2006) 175-205.

38. William Spence Robertson, *Francisco de Miranda y la Revolución de la América Española*. Trans. Diego Mendoza Pérez (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1918). Author’s translation.

39. Helen Delpar, *Looking South: The Evolution of Latin Americanist Scholarship in the United States, 1850-1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008) 33.

40. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 48.

41. Spence Robertson, *Rise of the Spanish* 9.

42. Novick 23.

Robertson, as described in his 1956 obituary, was fanatic in "his pursuit of the *inédit*" (the unpublished). His greatest triumph, as a proverbial "archive rat," was to correctly identify the likely location of the papers of Francisco de Miranda that had been embarked on the British schooner Saphire in La Guaira in July 1812 shortly before his arrest by the Spaniards. Although their existence had been known as early as 1884,⁴³ it was Robinson who deduced that they might be in the hands of the descendants of Lord Bathurst, Secretary for War and the Colonies. In 1922, Robertson gained access to the sixty-three bound volumes with a profusion of disorganized materials including personal diaries, letters, correspondence, and miscellanea.⁴⁴ When the news reached the Venezuelan amateur historian Caracciolo Parra Pérez four years later, the diplomat was able to convince Venezuelan General and President Juan Vicente Gomez to purchase the papers for 3,000 pounds sterling (US\$140,000 in today's dollars) to be deposited in the Academia Nacional de Historia in Caracas along with collections of and about Bolívar.⁴⁵

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Someone, of course, would have eventually discovered the whereabouts of this extensive and long sought after collection. It was far more important that Robertson's possessed the energy and drive—as well as the appropriate discipline and methods—to dominate this vast body of new evidence and cross-reference it internally and against materials he had drawn from a multitude of archives across Europe and the Americas. Having established Miranda's biographical trajectory with authority, his 633-page *Life of Miranda* was praised by all reviewers for its "painstaking research," "sound historical" scholarship, and a "keen critical faculty" that allowed for an "unimpassioned and unprejudiced estimate" of the man's strengths and weaknesses. While a "definitive work" that dispelled many mysteries, they

43. José María Rojas, *El General Miranda* (Paris: Garnier Hermanos, 1884) 30.

44. Spence Robertson shared news of the discovery before the book came out: "The Lost Archives of Miranda," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 7.2 (May, 1927): 229-232; "Los archivos perdidos de Miranda," *Boletín de la Academia de Historia de Venezuela* 38.10 (1927). For a good journalistic account, see Beatriz Newhall, "The Miranda Archives," *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* 47.6 (1933): 491-496.

45. Caracciolo Parra Pérez, *Páginas de Historia y de Polémica* (Caracas: Litografía del comercio, 1943) 89. By 1927, a rough index was published. Ministerio de Instrucción Pública de Venezuela. *Índice del Archivo del General Miranda* (Caracas: Tipografía americana, 1927) and the first fifteen volumes appeared by the mid-thirties before it was interrupted; the rest were published later and now online.

also emphasized it was the work of a “scholarly historian” not a “popular biographer.”⁴⁶ In 1937, a dozen U.S. historians joined colleagues from throughout Latin America for the II Congreso Internacional de Historia de América in Buenos Aires; the sixth volume of the Congress’s annals included a translation of the entire book.⁴⁷ It was a shared Pan-American triumph of a new profession.

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The strengths of *Life of Miranda* are a worthy expression of the ideal of scientific history in which Robertson had trained at the turn of the century.⁴⁸ Like the general public and most historians, Robertson did believe that some men were “notable” and “exceptional,” both in terms of their personal attributes and their importance to the unfolding of independence. His approach was unquestionably top down but the establishment of the basic sequence of events, actions, and ideas was an enduring achievement that would make other research possible. Nor should we be surprised that his writing was shaped by assumptions derived from unexamined hierarchies of class, education, gender, and race that he shared with his colleagues in both the U.S. and Latin America. Yet it is a wrong to confuse these shortcomings with advocacy of a “great man theory of history,” which better fits some but by no means all of his compatriots to the south.

Robertson’s work incarnated what he called the “standard practice” of history. In a short but thoughtful 1945 article, the seventy-three year old scholar offered his assessment of the writing of history in Latin America

46. Minor notes of criticism can be found in all of the reviews of Robertson’s books: that he tended to produce “a catalogue of facts un-illuminated by interpretative comments or clarifying generalizations;” that “an excess of caution (...) inhibits the author from expressing any view of his own;” or that, while his work was often a “paleographic tour de force” (1966), the books were “meticulous,” “more scholarly than scintillating.” Robertson leaned towards history as science not literature. His “writings never took wings, noted his obituary writer,” but this had to be balanced against the “solidity of the [evidentiary] base upon which they were built,” which displayed the man’s “massive integrity”. Humphreys, “William Spence Robertson...” 265.

47. William Spence Robertson, *La Vida de Miranda*. trans. Julio E. Payró, *II Congreso Internacional de Historia de América Reunido en Buenos Aires en los Días 5 a 14 de Julio de 1937 en la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, vol. 6 (Buenos Aires: Talleres de la S.A. Casa Jacobo Peuser, 1938).

48. He repeated the feat in 1952 with William Spence Robertson, *Iturbide of Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), the first biography of another Independence era actor with a vast private archive.

at the start of twentieth century when he began in the field. The portrait he painted was neither self-satisfied nor condescending but it was critical: too many Latin American writers of history failed to sufficiently valorize documents or the importance of establishing the facts; many skipped "the indispensable critical apparatus in the form of bibliographies and footnotes," too many showed the negative influence of philosophies and theories like positivism, and, above all, too many treated history as a "true school of patriotism." While carefully avoiding excessively broad generalizations, Robertson was careful to cite exceptions and was quick to cite historians in the region who offered similar criticisms. Above all, he was emphatic in joining those in the region who warned against "the evil influence upon historical writing of patriotism, prejudice, and misleading method," especially when combined with an insufficiently "critical spirit."⁴⁹

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As Robertson wrote these words in 1945, the discipline of history had been changed by a revolution in historical method and understanding in the thirties and forties had led scholars to move well beyond Ranke⁵⁰ and what might be call a plodding *factualist* history. As Simpson put it in 1948, "If Ranke's dictum is valid for all time (...) then there is nothing to worry about and we can spend the rest of our lives verifying facts without regard" to larger questions. While indispensable, he wrote, such a method condemns the historian to "forever play the part of a bookkeeper. We must add our 'why' to the 'what' of our predecessors," even if it might lead some to think us philosophers.⁵¹

Reflecting the tumult of a world in crisis marked by titanic mobilizations, the generation of historians in training in the thirties gave less priority to the day-to-day high politics of "great men" that preoccupied their predecessors. In the same 1948 article, Simpson also warned against what he called the "biographer's disease. The hero, being verifiably responsible for certain events, becomes the dynamic principle by which other events must occur."⁵² Latin Americanist historians of the inter-war generation, like their U.S. professional counterparts, were above all drawn to the broader context in which such men acted, especially the social and economic dimensions of

49. William Spence Robertson, "Trends in Latin-American Historiography," *Intellectual Trends in Latin America; Papers Read at a Conference on Intellectual Trends in Latin America* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1945) 4-7, 9, 11.

50. Kroeber 4.

51. Simpson 198.

52. Simpson 198, 196.

human existence that the field had so long neglected.⁵³ In a world of war and revolutions, the masses loomed powerfully on the historical agenda while they no longer believed in the older vision of history's towering isolation from the rest of social sciences.

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These new trends were felt most powerfully—at least as a direction for future research—in the study of the wars of Latin American independence. In a famous 1949 article, Charles C. Griffin famously called for study of the “Economic and Social Aspects of the Era of Spanish-American Independence.” Among the factors mentioned were the war’s demographic impacts, the shifts in trade and production, the enhancement of social mobility, the abolition of slavery and racial impediments, the weakening of paternalism, and shifts in the relationship between city and country and in the terms of culture and customs.⁵⁴

Long before the “social history” explosion of the sixties, an agenda had been laid out among U.S. historians that paved the way for a profound reorientation in our understanding of the vital transition represented by Latin American independence. With a PhD from the University of Michigan, William B. Taylor was a pioneer in the new social history approach to colonial Latin American history. His 1972 monograph *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* was followed by an influential second monograph in 1979, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages*, that appeared as social history consolidated its position within the discipline as a whole. Celebrating its move from the periphery to the comfortable center of the discipline, a group of Anglophone historians of Africa, China, Latin America, the United States, and Western Europe contributed to a 1985 volume entitled *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History*. Covering Latin America, William B. Taylor judged social history to have had a “large if diffuse impact on the way Latin American history is conceived.” In our field, he suggested, social history stood for “recognition of peoples in

53. Gibson and Keen 864.

54. Charles C. Griffin, “Economic and Social Aspects of the Era of Spanish-American Independence,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 29.2 (May, 1949): 170-187. See also his lectures drawn from this article in *Los temas sociales y económicos en la época de la Independencia: Ciclo de conferencias organizado por la Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, en Conmemoración del sesquicentenario de la Independencia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Fundación John Boulton / Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1962).

categories previously neglected” and “a rejection of traditional historical preoccupation with elites and ‘events.’”⁵⁵

In Taylor’s account, Latin Americanist social history was characterized by a shift away from narrative, a disinclination to study the state, and a manifest disinterest in the “top-level political leaders who visibly directed public life.” While favoring “a democratization of history that gives some notice to the great majority of our ancestors,” Latin American social history shifted attention “from rulers to subjects (as if such a neat dichotomy were possible).” As a result, they “routinely eschewed the study of national events (...) in favor of groups of ordinary people and their informal lives,” while treating each social group, in effect, as if they were “more or less autonomous (...) and without much reference to their relationships to other people.”⁵⁶

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At the time, Taylor saw important but not altogether salutary consequences to this stance. Social history as practiced, he suggested, tended “to separate latent from manifest history,” the latter referring to large scale events recognized as landmarks by contemporaries.⁵⁷ The tendency to minimize the *political* was also shaped by the rise of dependency theory and a more powerfully articulated Marxist analysis in the study of Latin American history in the seventies. As Taylor noted, this placed an overwhelming emphasis on the structural and systemic, giving pride of place to issues such as capitalism and modes of production or imperialism and international dependency. The result, at the time, was that merely *political* shifts —such as the transition from colonialism to independence or monarchy to republic— were judged as superficial.⁵⁸ In a clear but cautiously stated dissent,

55. Taylor was fair-minded in characterizing the work of his predecessors: “Before about 1960, historians did not ignore the topics typical of social history but regarded them as secondary and did not research them systematically.” What we might today call the subaltern —“women, servants, children, peasants, vagrants, and criminals”— were passed over or given at best token attention. William B. Taylor, “Between Global Process and Local Knowledge: An Inquiry into Early Latin American Social History, 1500-1900,” *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History*, eds. Olivier Zunz and David William Cohen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) 118-119. I thank Eric van Young for calling this important essay to my attention.

56. Taylor 118-19, 142.

57. Taylor 119.

58. The year before Taylor’s article, the predominant social history consensus on continuity across independence was concisely stated in an influential 1984 textbook of colonial Latin American history by two pioneers in the field:

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Taylor specifically argued that “one series of events” should be accorded “a prominent place in the chronology of Latin American social history.” Echoing Griffin’s 1949 article, he suggested that the Independence Wars had brought powerful “changes in social behavior, state and society, property, community, and religion, particularly in rural areas. The political events, laws, and institutional changes of the period led to social change even when economic structures and modes of production were not much altered.”⁵⁹

If this is true, as recent research suggests, it is hard to imagine how historians today can continue to avoid engaging with the historical personalities that dominated the era.⁶⁰ It is true, of course, that the most distinguished Anglophone historian of the independence era, John Lynch (b. 1927), retained a biographical approach but this senior colleague’s example failed to influence the new generations of social historians that emerged a decade after his first very traditional book on Spanish colonial administration in 1958. This point has also been forcefully made in a recent historiographical article on Mexican Independence by Eric van Young. “With few exceptions, the newer trends in [Anglophone] social and cultural history” of Mexico, he said, have still continued to bypass both the period of independence and biography. Taking a long look backwards, this leading U.S. social and cultural historian of the independence era was puzzled because the irony was clear:

“All in all, the degree of continuity in the social, economic, and cultural realms between pre- and post-independence Latin America is obvious and overwhelming. Not only did cities, estates, ethnic groups, and regions retain their long-standing characteristics, but much of the change which occurred followed already established trends or repeated long familiar processes.” James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, eds., “Epilogue: The Coming of Independence,” *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 424.

59. Taylor 122-123.

60. In recent years, the Anglophone literature has decisively broken with the thesis of continuity and minimal change. On Colombia see Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism During the Age of Revolution, Colombia 1795-1831* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). For Mexico, see the incorporation of elements of cultural history in the recent monograph by Peter Guardino, *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750-1850* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); as well as his earlier *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico’s National State. Guerrero, 1800-1857* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

"Anglophone interest in Mexican independence was first represented by biographies of the lives of the great heroes of the movement." In particular, he cited key biographical works by four U.S. historians dating from 1952 (Robertson's *Iturbide*), 1954, 1966 and 1970.⁶¹ Yet "by the sixties and seventies the reaction against the biographical tradition in North American academic history pushed the approach of those historians working on Mexico more into the channels of social history as mapped out by European historians," with its bias against the biographical.⁶²

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Van Young speculated that perhaps these social and cultural historians believed that there was little left to do "with the Spanish imperial crisis anatomized, the biographies of many of the great figures written, and the political and military history in large measure mapped." Or "if social history is simply history with the politics left out," then perhaps "putting politics to one side in a primarily political process leaves [too] little for the social or cultural historian to do."⁶³ Or one might refer to an explanation he offered in his monumental 2001 monograph *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821*: that it stemmed from a rejection of the "fervently romantic/nationalist nineteenth century historiography and the mythogenesis to which it contributed" (Carlyle redux).⁶⁴

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61. Eric van Young, *Writing Mexican History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) 150-151.
62. Van Young, *Writing Mexican* 150-151.
63. Van Young, *Writing Mexican* 148. As in this article, van Young rightly treats the Mexican scholarship separately from that of historians to the north, despite the points of contact between the two groups.
64. Eric van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 3-4. In dialogue with broader social scientific debates, this vital monograph combines social and cultural historical approaches within a "history from the bottom up" rendering of popular participation (the "other rebellion") while minimizing attention to elite actors and conspiracies. While embracing prosopography, the book offers striking profiles of some local rebels and revolts although little attention is accorded to Father Miguel Hidalgo or other elite participants in these events and conspiracies. Eschewing the techniques of literary narrative, this commanding monograph offers a vast array of fascinating evidence while adopting a heavily analytical mode of presentation. As a specialized monograph of substance, it will long outlive the petty criticisms offered by some ardent polemicists like Alan Knight, "Eric van Young, *The Other Rebellion* y la Historiografía Mexicana," *Historia Mexicana* 54.2 (Oct.-Dec., 2004): 445-515.

Towards a Biographical Pivot? Questions of Theory and Practice

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We have seen that the rise of social history, even before the sixties, advanced a critique of the established mode of biographical historical research and writing. The turn away from biography was especially powerful in relation to historical personalities of unquestionable stature such as Francisco de Miranda and Simon Bolívar. We have also seen how an unreflective bias against biography originated in the oversimplified indictment that social history, in its infancy, directed against prior historical scholarship as based on the “great man” theory of history. As Archila and Taylor have observed, they tended to conflate the “political,” the “biographical,” and “the history of events” (*histoire événementielle*) and rejected all three as superficial and elitist.

Yet there is a larger theoretical debate that underlies the shift by professional historians after World War II away from a top-down focus on the writings, speech acts, and deeds of individual members of the elites (*histoire événementielle*), whether generals, presidents, or diplomats. While biographies would continue to be written, the cutting edge of the profession was driven by the search for deeper causal explanation through a focus on socio-economic and, eventually, cultural processes. As history grappled with social structures and the constitution of collectivities and identities (nations, classes, genders), political and diplomatic history lost its preeminence within the discipline and more analytical, rather than strictly narrative, forms of written expression came to the fore.

Professional interest in the geographic, socio-economic, demographic, cultural, and familial dimensions of human societies was accompanied, with social history’s explosive growth, by a sharply increased focus on subaltern actors such as workers, peasants, racially subordinated groups, and eventually women. As part of this bold demand to ‘democratize’ historical narrative, one young U.S. historian published a scandalously harsh attack on nineteenth-century Latin American historiography in *HAHR* in 1978. Based on a prosopography of sixty-three Latin American historians, E. Bradford Burns linked their role as privileged members of the “social, political and economic elites” to the patriotic histories they wrote with their focus on “extraordinary” and “exemplary” white men like themselves. In his overly broad “bottom up” critique, he condemned their Eurocentric and class-bound histories as apologias for the status quo that were irrelevant to

the Indian, African, mestizo, and mulatto lower class majorities of their respective countries.⁶⁵

While rejecting the elitism of *historia patria*, U.S. social history bias against biography derived in part from the Marxist social theory, however heterodox, that informed its work. The Marxist materialism that emerged in the nineteenth century as a critique of liberalism tended to minimize individual agency in favor of social determinism. Scientific and positivist in its search for law-like general causes, Marxism offered a systemic theorization of society, a focus on structural features, and an evolutionary societal dynamic. The classic Marxist formulation on *The Role of the Individual in History* can be found in an 1898 essay by Russian Marxist G. V. Plekhanov. In a lively engagement with the Napoleon debate going back to Carlyle, Plekhanov addressed the counterfactual: would European history have been different if Napoleon had not lived. While recognizing Napoleon's importance in the events, Plekhanov declared that his apparent indispensability was an "an optical illusion." If the individual named Napoleon had not existed, then some other man of equal talents or attributes would have emerged to fulfill the **role** of Napoleon which originated, he argued, in the social and historical imperatives of his age.

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The personal qualities of leading people determine the individual features of historical events; and the accidental element (...) always plays some role in the course of these events, the trend of which is determined in the last analysis by so-called general causes, i.e. actually by the development of productive forces and the mutual relations between men in the socio-economic process of production.⁶⁶

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65. E. Bradford Burns, "Ideology in Nineteenth-Century Latin American Historiography," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58.3 (Aug., 1978): 415, 417-20, 424, 429.
66. His concern, Plekhanov wrote, was with the "deep-lying general causes" not the "casual phenomena and personal qualities of celebrated people." See sections VII and VIII of G. V. Plekhanov, "On the Role of the Individual in History [First Published in 1898 in *Nauchnoye Obrozhniye*, n.º 3 & 4]," *Selected Works of G.V. Plekhanov* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1961. It should be emphasized that this dichotomy between surface appearances and deeper underlying explanations would come to be shared by western objectivist social science disciplines in the 20th century.

The modern preference, as Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James noted, was to treat individual actors as “a personification of the social forces [in contention, with] great men being merely or nearly the instruments” of larger societal structures, patterns, and tendencies.⁶⁷

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Although Marxism still exercises some indirect influence, the most influential theoretical objection to biography today derives from the rise of structuralism in the sixties as it evolved, after 1968, into the post-structuralism that acquired broad influence in the Anglophone academy in the eighties. This complex body of thought, which includes Foucault, Althusser, Lévi-Straus, and Bourdieu, would come to be referred to as “French theory” in the U.S. in the eighties.⁶⁸ In a stimulating new book *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, French sociologist Razmig Keucheyan has aptly described sixties French structuralism as characterized by “a form of historical determinism and objectivism” that emphasized the “*longue durée* and the ‘structural invariants’ constitutive of the social world.” This was combined with their theoretical “anti-humanism” with its slogan of abolishing or dethroning an (allegedly) Cartesian subject (often referred to as the “death of the subject”).⁶⁹ A good example of this move can be seen in

67. The specific language offered by James is that the “great man” is viewed at best an “instrument in the hands of economic destiny.” thus signaling his adherence to Marxism in C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 11. In truth, James broke decisively with this proposition and accorded the genius Toussaint Louverture immense influence over the course of Haitian Revolution. This position was subject to criticism in the nineties as slighting the enslaved majority, especially the African born. For a useful and sympathetic discussion of James’s views, along with a challenge to poststructuralism, see David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 37-38.

68. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

69. As he notes, structuralisms’ determinism lost its credibility after the events of 1968 when “the thunder clap of May abruptly altered the perception of politics and history, obliging structuralisms to reassess their positions. Structuralism is not ‘1968 thought’ because May 1968 compelled it to move towards poststructuralism” (itself a form of structuralism, one might add). Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013) 44-45. A fascinating history of the

Pierre Bourdieu's 1986 essay on "The Biographical Illusion." Unconsciously echoing Plekhanov, he emphasized that life history, "a common sense notion which has [now] been smuggled into the learned universe," was based on the false "presupposition that life is a history" rather than a point of inflection within a broader social field.⁷⁰

In *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (2004), U.S. anthropologist Marshall Sahlins takes up the challenge of "the acting historical subject." How, he asks, are we to conceptualize "the relationships between types of historical agency and modes of historical change?" Scholars, he suggested, have for too long avoided this debate out of fear that they will become "mired in the old epistemic murk of 'the great man theory of history' and the even more ancient quicksands of 'the individual versus society'."⁷¹ Yet Sahlins reminds us that we need not adhere to the view that people are above all "the creatures of some great social machinery," whether created by or through "Althusserian-derived interpellations, Gramscian-inspired hegemonies, or power-laden Foucaultian discourses" (or Marxist political economy one might add). Nor need we embrace the opposite extreme that people are "autonomous and self-moving, society being nothing but the residue (...) of their self-regarding projects."⁷² Although the latter proposition is entirely without influence among historians, this hyper-individualistic posture remains popular among doctrinaire market economists and neo-liberals. It finds its clearest expression in Margaret Thatcher's repeated declaration that "society" does not exist.

Joining voices like Emília Viotti da Costa, Sahlins would have us look back to the theoretical terrain from which structuralism emerged in the sixties. In *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jean

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intellectual terrain in the sixties and seventies that produced "French theory" can be found in Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

70. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," *Identity: A Reader*, eds. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (London: Sage, 2001) 297, 301-2. With his false dichotomies, Bourdieu preempts the possibility that it might be both, in some sense.
71. Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 138.
72. Sahlins 139, 144-45.

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Paul Sartre was engaged in a promising project of fusing the insights of phenomenology (existentialism) and Marxism.⁷³ The former was to be grounded within society and structures while the latter was to be freed from determinism and hyper-objectivism. As noted in a recent article in *International Labor and Working Class History*, Sartre and Edward Palmer Thompson are the two most notable proponents of this “submerged tradition within Western Marxist thought that attempted to advance not pure subjectivity but, at least, a ‘subject-object dialectic’ against the older ‘objective’ orthodoxy.”⁷⁴

Summarizing Sartre’s key insights, Sahlins notes that there are in fact no standard interchangeable subjects, “persons who are nothing but what their class, country, or ethnic group has made them.” Rather, there is only “the concrete individual, whose relations to the totality are mediated by a particular biographical experience in families and other institutions,” and who thus express “the cultural universal in individual form.” What we are dealing with empirically, he suggests, is the:

(...) biographical individual. He is a historic complex *sui generis*. Neither biological nor psychological, nor civilizational factors exhaust his content. He has partaken of the culture of his social environment, but only of certain aspects of it, and these have [been] (...) received and absorbed by a psyche that was unique. This is the concrete individual of historical society.⁷⁵

To paraphrase Sartre, “you are not what society has done to you but what you do with what is done to you.” As Sartre suggests, the freedom to which humans are condemned consists in “that small movement which makes of

73. Jean Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage, 1960). For an excellent introduction, see Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 206-305.

74. Verity Burgmann, “The Multitude and the Many-Headed Hydra: Autonomist Marxist Theory and Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (2013): 172-173. Few if any scholars have recognized, even obliquely, the kinship between historically-infused intellectual projects of Sartre and Edward Palmer Thompsons in the same years. Sartre’s historically situated phenomenology parallels Thompsonian “experience” while Sartre’s critique of hyper-objectivism is closely akin to the position assumed by Thompson in his polemic against hyper-objectivist Marxism of Althusser, a key figure in the structuralist revolt against Sartre in the mid-sixties.

75. Sahlins 151-152.

a totally socially conditioned social being, someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.”⁷⁶

Having begun my career writing a social history of politics and law, I have been increasingly drawn to the biographical in my writing of social and political history. In 2010, I published a biographical study in *HAHR* of Communist electrician Marcos Andreotti (1910-1984), the most important labor leader in the ABC region of greater Sao Paulo prior to Lula.⁷⁷ Drawing on a fifty-five hour oral history as well as an abundance of police and judicial sources, I focused on the analytical challenge presented by political militancy, an arena “where the borders between the objective and subjective are weakened.”⁷⁸ I argued for the special importance of biography for historians given our disciplinary “concern with historical totality” and our insistence, in the words of Charles Bergquist, “on the interrelatedness of all aspects of social change.”⁷⁹ After all, historians routinely employ a process of abstraction in which we isolate one or another dimension of reality and deal with it separately under a number of guises. In doing so, we produce a series of abstract representations of reality that may be referred to, for example, as the economic, social, political, intellectual, or cultural. Simultaneously, we

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76. Christina Howells, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 130.
77. John D. French, “How the Not-So-Powerless Prevail: Industrial Labor Market Demand and the Contours of Militancy in Mid-Twentieth-Century São Paulo, Brazil,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 90.1 (Feb., 2010): 109-142; the Portuguese translation is forthcoming as “Como os não tão fracos prevalecem: a demanda no mercado de trabalho industrial e os contornos da militância na São Paulo de meados do século XX, Brasil,” *Cadernos AEL* (2013) published by the Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas.
78. Marco Aurélio García, “The Gender of Militancy: Notes on the Possibilities of a Different History of Political Action,” *Gender and History: Retrospect and Prospect*, eds., Leonore Davidoff, Keith McClelland and Eleni Varikas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 44. As García notes, these new approaches are linked to the best of the historiographical impact of second wave feminism that raised fundamental questions about the relationship between the public and private and the personal and political. See also the introduction and conclusion of John D. French and Daniel James, *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 1-30, 297-313.
79. Charles Bergquist, “In the Name of History: A Disciplinary Critique of Orlando Fals Borda’s *Historia doble de la Costa*,” *Latin American Research Review* 25.3 (1990): 168-169.

deploy other abstractions to further discipline the unruliness of the phenomenon under examination. We may distinguish levels such as the local, national, or global as well as the individual, family, and community. And we may use classificatory systems to distinguish class, race, and gender or to mark off the systemic and structural from the conjunctural.

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While necessary, these analytical tools and shortcuts interfere with our objective of attaining and communicating a holistic and totalizing historical vision.⁸⁰ Although inescapable, this problem can often be lessened through the judicious use of a biographical approach, all the more so for modern historians who may have access to the tools of oral history and *testimonio*.⁸¹ When done properly, the study of an individual links levels of reality that are otherwise artificially separated. After all, individuals do not experience their own lives as divided into discrete and abstract constituent elements that can be neatly separated and labeled. Rather, the various aspects, levels, or dimensions of that reality are experienced by the individual as an integrated part of an organic whole: the lived experience of a concrete individual fixed in a moment of historical space and time. In this sense, individuals are not alienated from one or another of the determining forces that shape their lives; rather they experience them as “of-a-piece” which is, in turn, shaped by their own action (*praxis*).

Biography’s advantages are all the more important when the individual in question is effaced by dominant discourses, be they by their contemporaries or by later scholars. The human specificity of a Brazilian Communist activist like Andreotti, for example, is denied by both the rhetoric of demonization from the right and by the grandiose and abstract language of official collectivist ideology on the left. Even in scholarly writing on labor and working class politics, we too often deal in external labels and ideological markers rather than interpreting these abstractions in light of the individuals who made

80. For an example of a hyper-objectivist logic of “abstraction through subtraction,” see the polemic by John Womack Jr., “Doing Labor History: Feeling, Work, Material Power,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* 5.3 (2005): 255-296, and our response: John D. French and Daniel James. “The Travails of Doing Labor History: The Restless Wanderings of John Womack Jr.,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 4.2 (2007): 95-116. A second round of debate was published in *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 5.2 (2008): 117-129.

81. Daniel James, *Doña Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

them a real force through their actions. When approached in this fashion, "concrete historical subjects" are "engulfed by broad explanatory mechanisms" and individual militants "appear as participants in an impersonal system."⁸² In other words, we will never truly understand labor history—or collective projects of social transformation—if we do not grasp the biographical dimension that underlies the personal lives of militants like Andreotti who stood at the center of *organized* working class and leftist struggle.

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Andreotti was largely unknown outside the industrial ABC region where he made his home from 1925 to 1984. He is in no sense as historically consequential as Brazil's ex-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a man of national and global stature who stands with Getúlio Vargas as one of the most important modern Brazilian leaders. I thus face a quite distinct challenge as I finish my current book entitled *The Origin of Brazil's Lula: From Trade Unionism to the Presidency*, a biographical interpretation of his leadership. I have found that the difference in stature, not to say importance, between these two working class men is best captured in the language offered by Sahlins when he speaks of the *structures of agency*. To understand "individual historical agency," he argues, one must examine "the structures of history that authorize it." To do that requires that we break with:

(...) certain received ideas of an unbridgeable opposition between the cultural order and individual agency (...) together with the correlated antitheses of the sociological and the psychological, the objective and the subjective, the lawful and the contingent, the universal and the particular (...) It is true (...) [he goes on, that] these contrastive aspects of human existence are irreducible the one to the other, which is one reason why historians and social scientists are often motivated to argue the inconsequentiality of either structures or persons. But what all this Manichaeism ignores is the way persons can be empowered to represent collectives: *to instantiate or personify them, sometimes even to bring them into existence*, without, however, losing their own individuality. Or in other words, what is not sufficiently considered is how history makes the history-makers.⁸³

To this we might add the wise reflection by Emilia Viotti da Costa:

History is not the result of some mysterious and transcendental "human agency," but neither are men and women the puppets of histo-

82. García 50.

83. Sahlins 155, emphasis added.

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rical “forces.” Their actions constitute the point at which the constant tension between freedom and necessity is momentarily resolved. We have become so habituated to seeing history as product of reified historical categories, to talking about “variables” and “factors,” to dealing with abstractions such as capitalism, abolitionism, evangelicalism, and the like, that we often forget that history is made by men and women, even though they make it under conditions they themselves have not chosen. In the last instance, what matters is the way people interact, the way they think about the world and act upon it, and how in this process they transform the world and themselves.⁸⁴

By Way of Conclusion: A Reflection on the Historian’s Craft

The founding of *HAHR* by William Spence Robertson and his colleagues were part of the process of professionalization through which U.S. historians solidified their self-understanding as a discipline with little patience for the theoretical meditations with which I ended this article. This article has suggested, however, that the rise of Marxism and objectivist social science helps explain why historians turned away from the biographical, a development reinforced by the structuralist and poststructuralist vogue in recent decades. It calls, in particular, for a deeper engagement with the largely forgotten theoretical project of Jean Paul Sartre in the late 1950’s which provides the basis for a new understanding of the acting individual, the role of the biographical, and the structure-agency debate. My call for such engagement with theory should not, however, blind us to the advantages historians possess as technicians of the empirical for whom a well-executed historiography is the closest we come to approximating the “theoretical.”

In honor of the preceding generation that founded and shaped our discipline, I would turn to a fascinating 2012 book that historians have benefited from a certain disciplinary narrowness in a U.S. academic world where the integrity of, and boundaries between disciplines are being challenged. In *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, Harvard sociologist Michele Lamont used documentary sources, participant observation, and interviews in the early 2000’s to study the interdisciplinary national review panels that decide the fate of grant applications in the huma-

84. Emília Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 18.

nities and social sciences in the U.S. Her chapter "On Disciplinary Cultures" profiles six academic disciplines including history, which she convincingly described as "the consensual discipline" marked by "relatively high degree of agreement on what constitutes quality and how to recognize it." In history, she writes, the disciplinary center has held based on a "shared agreement of what constitutes historical craftsmanship, a sense of 'careful archival work.'"⁸⁵ In her rendering, history's remarkable consensus on method and technique can be clearly contrasted to more divided disciplines, such as English and Anthropology, which are still destabilized by the theoretical controversies of the eighties and nineties. Despite all the changes in our disciplinary discourse over a century, it is hard not to believe that William Spence Robertson would be pleased that the craft he championed is still alive, even if not all today would dub it a science.

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History's well-established disciplinary consensus does more than offer a competitive advantage in the academic marketplace. It also serves to mitigate internal tensions such as those occasioned by the rise of social history after the sixties, or its subsequent decline in the past twenty years as cultural history has come to occupy a leading position. Looking back on the linguistic turn,⁸⁶ historians today can be said to have successfully absorbed—some might say neutered—its theoretical challenges while weaving its insights into our historical practice. As Africanist labor historian Frederick Cooper commented in 2005, the cultural turn produced "excellent research and valuable reflections" that corrected "the excesses of a previous turn, toward social history and political economy in the seventies."⁸⁷ Yet he was not alone in calling for a move away from its distorting dichotomies. As Brazilian historian Emília Viotti da Costa suggested in 2001, the polarization between old (social) and new (cultural) approaches ran the risk of moving

85. Michele Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 79-80, 84.

86. For interesting disciplinary postmortems on these debates, see the contributions by senior non-Latin Americanist U.S. scholars to the *American Historical Review's* forum on Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Participants included William H. Sewell, Jr., Gabrielle M. Spiegel, and Manu Goswami with a response by Eley: *American Historical Review* 113.2 (2008): 391-437.

87. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 6.

“from one reductionism to another, from economic to cultural or linguistic reductionism.”⁸⁸ As she has noted elsewhere:

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Identities, language, and meanings are products of social interaction, which takes place within a specific system of social relations and power, with its own rituals, protocols, and sanctions. The material conditions of peoples’ lives, the way human and ecological resources are utilized and distributed, the concrete ways power is exerted, are as important in shaping identities, defining language, and creating meanings, as the social codes that mediate experience or the conventions used to define what is real. In fact, material conditions and symbolic systems are intimately connected.⁸⁹

And these abstractions, I would insist, have no existence outside of the lives of concrete individuals as they make meaning out of their experience both individually and collectively. Thus there is much to gain from a culturally sensitive and social historically attuned use of biography as we chart a future path for our craft.

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88. Emília Viotti da Costa, “New Publics, New Politics, New Histories: From Economic Reductionism to Cultural Reductionism-in Search of Dialectics,” *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History: Essays from the North*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 17-31.

89. Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory* 15.

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