

Guest editorial: Critical biography as a methodology in management history

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Critical biography is a rigorous form of biography, a historical essay on an individual or group informing a critical analysis of institutions and events. Biography provides a narrative of an individual's life and often celebrates a famous personality. It may be entertaining and informative but limited in valuable content beyond presenting the subject's case. On the other hand, critical biography is characterized by sound contextual and historical analysis. It need not be neutral, but factual evidence and transparent argument are crucial. Critical biography as a methodology complements institutional inquiry and empirical evidence of other kinds. It may be guided by questions raised by other research methods. It has the effect of humanizing and problematizing abstract theory and may reveal the social consequences of policy decisions. However, the full benefits of a critical stance are not always realized.

In this Special Issue of *The Journal of Management History*, we present a collection of provocative critical biographies. Our hope is to make the case for critical biography as a methodology in management history. We see critical biographies as constituting a web of narratives illuminating individuals, organizations and events. If the essays follow the template we propose, or a similar one, they may cohere into a larger framework. We propose that critical biographies interrogate hierarchies, because it is precisely in the implementation and contestation of various hierarchies that management is defined. Voices from below join the discussion. Narratives of individual agents provide multiple views of organizations. Critical biography brings the realities of parallax to the fore: organizations look very different from alternate perspectives. In these essays, we find the persistence of hierarchical thinking even among putative advocates of egalitarianism and other potential contradictions.

Critical biography may assume a range of narrative forms, anything from a vignette describing an incident in the life of the subject to a more expansive account of the subject's life, including background and significant contributions. These biographies reveal individuals acting on their values, assumptions and identities in varied contexts and making contributions of diverse kinds. The practitioner considers practical choices in the context of values and assumptions. The scholar may test a formal hypothesis but is guided by values and assumptions. The writer considers the trajectory of a life and details the interaction of the subject and the environment. Every individual is evolving in a dynamic context (Jacobs, 2007, 2026).

The methodology of critical biography requires a measure of distance to accurately assess the choices and actions of the subject and enhance the value of the investigation. Because of the frequency with which powerful figures receive the attention of enthusiastic biographers, and journalists' deference to established power, critical biography demands skepticism about elites, however difficult this may be to maintain, as well as scrutiny of self-serving narratives from any quarter.

For example, historians and philosophers have written of the work of Immanuel Kant. They have sought to assess the categorical imperative, which, among other things, directs that we treat others always as ends, never solely as means. Scholars debate Kant's applications of the categorical imperative across human populations.

Some of his writings suggest myopia about non-Western communities and women. Flikschuh and Ypi (2014) and others find evidence of increasing cosmopolitanism in Kant's thinking over time. The interpretation of Kantian ethics is an ongoing project, represents a



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dialog with his ideas and reflects the values of his interlocutors. Biographical studies of Kant should contextualize his ideas, problematize his arguments and extend the conversation across generations.

Critical biography must be transparent about the assumptions of the author. Rendering assumptions explicit enhances the reader's conversation with the author and indirectly with the subject. Multi-directional conversation is a central element in any investigation.

Considering the temptations and pressures that compromise the integrity of biography, we argue that critical biography should emphasize fundamental problems of hierarchy and organization, comparing subjects' views. This also permits a "history of ideas framework" in which authors identify streams of thought connecting multiple thinkers and practitioners who might emphasize collaborative or elite-driven modes of practice.

Biography emerged from storytelling in the oral tradition and from funerary inscriptions, recording the lives of neighbors and the powerful. At times it has been myth-building for the further aggrandizement of elites, but more recently it has become a tool of investigation from below. The history of biography has tended to reflect the reigning authorities of the moment but also may record the deeds of individuals and movements challenging those authorities.

The first biographies were stories told to preserve memories of ancestors, community members or leaders. At first oral, these tales grounded living individuals in their family histories and constituted their identities. With the development of written languages, the historical scope of these accounts lengthened. Gilgamesh was the subject of an early epic poem in 21st century BC Mesopotamia, preserved on a clay tablet. An early group biography was Plutarch's *Lives* (100 CE) in which the author identified critical moments and decisions in the lives of 48 historical figures. Suetonius (121 CE) wrote *On the Lives of the Caesars*. The Old and New Testaments combined biography and parable. Biblical stories provided opportunities to compare received narratives and to distinguish contending moral claims.

In the Middle Ages, biographies focused on Saints, Popes and other figures of devotion. The objective was to celebrate religious leaders and advance religious commitments. In the Islamic world, biographies focused on Mohamed and other prophets and biographical dictionaries were written. The invention of the printing press widened popular access to religious texts, including biographies.

An increasingly literate population turned to secular topics. King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable, for example, were immortalized in Sir Thomas Malory's (1485) work. James Boswell's (1791) *The Life of Samuel Johnson* was one of the first biographies to focus on a single life.

The emerging disciplines of psychology and sociology became tools of biography, adding complexity and reflexivity. These disciplines were applied in the investigation of organizations, illuminating social relations. Max Weber and C. Wright Mills were well known for their work blending sociology and biography (Merrill and West, 2009).

A few classic biographies demonstrate the value and potential historic impact of critical work. Historian Fawn Brodie published *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* in 1945 (Brodie, 1995). Her well-researched but provocative biography of the founder of Mormonism earned her excommunication from the Mormon Church. Years later, she penned *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* and revealed Jefferson's relationship with slave Sally Hemings, corroborated by other scholars (Brodie, 1974). Her works often used psychological investigation as a foundation of critical analysis. Brodie seemed to welcome controversy and faced considerable backlash as a result. Critical biography often inspires a reaction. While these books did not relate to management history, they do reflect a critical and synthetic stance.

Biographies have been central to historical scholarship on management but often have aligned with management's interests rather than stakeholders. Biographies of Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford and more recently Steve Jobs, Sam Walton and Jeff Bezos have embodied a defense of their leadership. They provide a very limited picture of organizational reality (although studies of Robert Owen, William Morris and Edward Filene, among others, represent exceptions because of the subjects' advocacy of workers' interests).

Edwin Locke's *Prime Movers*, a representative example of recent biographical work in management history (Locke, 2000), manifests a curious similarity to the religious biographies of the Middle Ages. His favorable portraits of business leaders constitute an invitation to honor them and declare allegiance. By implication, Locke is also exhorting readers to combat the critics of business. Much of management history scholarship continues to overvalue management agency and undervalue workers and other marginalized groups.

Critical biography can illuminate the deficiencies of rigid theories as applied to social problems.

For example, neoclassical theory in economics affirms the efficiency and justice of free markets in labor. A so-called "sweatshop" is normalized and the particular circumstances of workers' lives are deemphasized. A critical biography of workers' lives can counter deductive applications of theory. For example, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (Ehrenreich, 2001) is an autobiography of sorts, focusing on Ehrenreich's undercover exploration of the world of low-wage labor. Christine Seifert's *The Factory Girls* (Seifert, 2017), about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, is also illuminating in this way. Needless to say, a biography of a single individual or group does not override cases, institutional analysis and surveys, but it can help check the scholar's dogmatic assumptions.

The temptation to grow enamored of the subject is common among biographers in a variety of fields. Sometimes it reaches an extreme form of obsession. It is a temptation in political history as well and even arises among contemporary writers embracing critical biography. (Brodie's revelations in her books surprised readers accustomed to hagiography.)

Critical biographical essays in management history have proliferated in recent years. The critical element opens up opportunities to question preexisting power structures. One recent work, Gibson *et al.* (2003) on Mary Parker Follett, reveals what was novel in the thinking of Mary Parker Follett, who inquired as to the "law of the situation" in an organization, emphasizing knowledge over position in hierarchy. As a scholar and practitioner with a nonconforming identity, Follett subjected organizations and their practices to a thorough critique. Her substantive insights and particular perspective add an important dimension to organizational studies. [One may distinguish thinkers and practitioners whose concern is the defense of hierarchy from those who favor more participatory structures, as outlined in Jacobs (2007)].

Most recently, Zickar (2024) provided unanticipated rewards through a critical biography of writer Upton Sinclair, whose novels and journalism exposed the horrors of working conditions in meatpacking and other industries. While Herbert Spencer and other Social Darwinists ignored the details of exploitation and found social progress in cutthroat competition, Sinclair presented the sordid reality and helped inspire legislation for the meatpacking industry. Sinclair's contacts and networks gave him an expansive view of modern industry, far beyond the narrow prism of the elite business school academics of his era. His political activism exposed him to the realities of policymaking and ridicule from his ideological adversaries.

Scholars and journalists often practice a single methodology in their research. Some scholars may insist on a hypothesis-testing framework and settle on a test statistic that represents a one-dimensional view of a problem. They may deny the representativeness of

cases or the potential contribution of biography. A narrow definition of science may account for these judgments.

On the other hand, mathematicians who use “brute force” in their inquiries or pragmatists following Charles Peirce’s concept of abduction recognize that scientific investigation takes many forms and follows many stages. Hypotheses often emerge from “hunches,” which guide testing. It is not a neutral, mechanical process. The scientist has assumptions and values, which may be rendered transparent by critical biography.

If we were to evaluate scientific management, the logic of the assembly line with its efficiencies and work degradation, we might use a spectrum of methodologies. An empirical test of organizational performance under scientific management and alternative schemes would be one approach. Critical biographies of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the Gilbreths and other advocates of scientific management would provide a picture of their values and motives. Neither a hagiography of Taylor nor a deductive argument would stand alone. Critical biographies of workers and union activists would broaden our understanding.

[Bedeian and Taylor \(2009\)](#) explored the Gilbreths and their apparent commitment to eugenics, although ostensibly a “moderate” form encouraging mating within the intellectual elite rather than sterilization of the poor. The possible relationship between scientific management and views of the working class may be revealed in the subjects’ treatment of eugenics. Support for eugenics does not necessarily undermine the claims of the advocates of scientific management, but it invites further investigation and additional analytical distance.

Management scholars have also begun to draw connections between critical biography technique and the methodological tradition of microhistory ([Deal, 2022](#); [Egholm, Heller and Rowlinson, 2025](#); [Hargadon and Wadhvani, 2023](#)). Microhistory focuses on the detailed examination of individuals, events or communities to illuminate broader social and cultural dynamics. Microhistorical approaches use the close study of particular actors to reveal the complex workings of larger systems of power, knowledge and organization. As [Deal \(2025\)](#) argued, microhistorical inquiry offers a productive pathway for management and organizational history because it enables scholars to uncover how ideas are reinterpreted in specific contexts. Focusing on the granular level of lived experience allows microhistory to complement critical biography’s attention to the relationship between individual agency and institutional structures. By this we mean that the careful reconstruction of a protagonist’s life can expose how managerial ideas are enacted within concrete organizational settings (rather than simply accepted as abstract orthodoxies). [Phipps and Prieto’s \(2021\)](#) sketch of Susan B. Anthony, an American social reformer and women’s rights activist, and Maggie Lena Walker, the first African American entrepreneur to found and lead a chartered bank during segregation, reveals how biographical attention to individual lives can uncover the ways marginalized actors shaped management practice despite structural barriers. Indeed, both microhistory and critical biography challenge grand narratives of management and organization by foregrounding actors who might otherwise be remain peripheral in traditional accounts. In this sense, microhistory strengthens the methodological foundations of critical biography by demonstrating how the careful reconstruction of individual lives can generate insight into the evolution of management and the social hierarchies that shape it.

What critical biography provides that other methodologies cannot is an analysis of the values, assumptions, identities, contexts and experiences of thinkers and practitioners as they influence organizational realities. The point of critical biography is, of course, not to be negative. The point is to explore actions and consequences, assumptions and validation, rhetoric and reality and underlying debates.

The essays in this special issue do not all follow the same template but do place individual actions in social and historical context. They cover a diversity of nations and cultures.

Bartoluzzio *et al.*, Rogers, Ruel, Schachter, Sant' Anna and Williams consider subjects of lesser status in organizations. Marginalized Brazilian women reconceiving of accounting to serve the poor, a Māori Chief, the role of women in the Canadian space program, civil rights militant W. E. B. DuBois and two important female labor organizers are the topics of these papers. Zickar writes of radical utopian Edward Bellamy, whose ostensibly egalitarian vision reproduced gender and racial hierarchies. Tuncalp, Fillis and Lehman consider two entrepreneurs: Süreyya Ciliv at Turkcell and David Walsh, founder of the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania. All navigate the social and economic hierarchies of their contexts, seeking and deploying power and facing myriad challenges to their personal and social objectives.

Alann Inaldo Silva de Sa Bartoluzzio, *et al.* consider the diary of a Brazilian resident of the favelas to uncover struggles of the marginalized. In this reconstructed diary, Carolina Maria de Jesus asserted her right to survive economic adversity and described the means she used to prevail. She was a hotel maid, laundress, cook and nanny and garbage picker, as well as a street performer. Her writings, urated into a book by a journalist, catapulted de Jesus to public attention, albeit briefly, but no barrier to early demise. Like any individual in such circumstances, Carolina was obliged to improvise to meet financial exigencies, practicing barter, self-denial, self-medication, protest, appeals to charity and accepting an assortment of jobs, all the while squeezing subsistence from scarcity. This chapter reveals the differentiated character of life under oppressive economic conditions, the unseen burdens of hierarchy, the messy details of survival and the truncated consciousness of the affluent.

Ian Fillis and Kim Lehman contribute "David Walsh, entrepreneur and new venture creator: Using critical biographical methodology as insight into entrepreneurial marketing." Their research uses a critical biographical approach to examine the life and career of David Walsh, the Australian entrepreneur, professional gambler and founder of the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Tasmania. Fillis and Lehman explore how Walsh's personal experiences and social context shaped the development of his unconventional cultural venture. While their study reveals a set of competences (e.g. creative opportunity recognition) that underpinned the evolution of Mona as a cultural institution, their biographical sketch of Walsh also helps us to better understand entrepreneurial marketing as an interdisciplinary field in business. Methodologically, the article demonstrates the value of critical biography for advancing praxis in entrepreneurship and marketing research. The authors do this through narrative reconstruction of Walsh for us all to see how entrepreneurial creativity develops over time through lived experience. We believe the article expands the application of critical biography beyond management history to include the study of eclectic cultural entrepreneurs like Walsh who are not typically the focus of management historical inquiry but whose lives offer important insight into entrepreneurial practice.

Jason Rogers' "Advancing critical biography with Indigenous methodology: Understanding Māori entrepreneurship" offers an ontological and methodological framework that repositions Māori knowledge as an analytical foundation rather than a mere complement to Western theories. By integrating *Kaupapa Māori* as the primary epistemological lens and critical biography as the narrative's organizing structure, the work overcomes the limitations of traditional approaches, which tend to interpret Indigenous figures in linear, individualistic and decontextualized ways. This combination allows for an understanding of entrepreneurial actions as expressions of collective values, ancestral responsibilities and strategies for cultural survival, thereby expanding concepts beyond capitalist logic and its hierarchies. The study contributes by demonstrating that Indigenous methodologies can enrich management history, offer more accurate interpretations of leaders

such as Hongi Hika and pave the way for the decolonization of management theories, while simultaneously providing a replicable model for future research on individuals from Indigenous and native peoples' contexts and cultures.

Stefanie Ruel's article, "Storying business histories: a Canadian Alouette woman's spiral through space and time," draws on a sophisticated effort at data collection from numerous archives and interviews to reconstruct the largely forgotten contributions of Doris Jelly, one of more than 120 women involved in the Canadian Alouette I satellite program during the Cold War. Launched in 1962, Alouette I was Canada's first satellite and made the country the third nation to place a satellite in orbit, following the Soviet Union and the USA. The satellite program represented a significant milestone in Canada's scientific community as it helped establish the country as an early participant in the emerging global space industry. As Ruel, herself a former mission manager with the Canadian Space Agency, argues the histories of this achievement have overwhelmingly centered on male scientists and engineers, leaving the contributions of women largely absent from the historical record. Through a poststructural, intersectional feminist lens and the use of gendered antenarratives, her article challenges these dominant masculine grand narratives that have historically defined accounts of the Canadian space industry. Ruel uses a "spiral of storying" that weaves fragmented historical traces about Jelly and the Canadian space industry into a speculative and dialogical narrative form, foregrounding the power relations embedded in archival records. Her work demonstrates how critical biography can surface marginalized actors whose contributions have been made obscure by institutional hierarchies (e.g. Canadian Space Agency) and historiographic conventions like writing "linear" histories (Boje, 2014).

In "Rose Pesotta and the boundaries of management history," Hindy Schachter writes of Rose Pesotta, a labor organizer from the early 20th century, and reconceives her roles in managerial terms. In doing so, she reconsiders nestled organizational hierarchies from multiple perspectives. Pesotta led as organizer and union activist even as she returned to the shop floor. She exercised power and influence from the bottom up, top down and horizontally. By virtue of her return to the workplace, Pesotta retained her working class identity and assumed new roles. Her anarchist sympathies stimulated a measure of skepticism about all hierarchies... Her willingness to engage with diverse linguistic and cultural communities enhanced her successes as an organizer. Schachter's essay is a revealing exercise of parallax rotating garment enterprises and unions to illuminate divergent interests and Pesotta's penetrating analysis.

Deniz Tuncalp's "Leadership in emerging markets for digitalization: a critical biography of Süreyya Ciliz" applies a critical biography approach to explore digital leadership in emerging markets, challenging heroic narratives that idolize CEOs while neglecting the institutional factors that influence their choices. By integrating interviews with various stakeholders, regulatory documents, employee perspectives and the author's autoethnographic insights, it provides a rare, richly contextualized analysis of Turkcell's digital transformation. The key contribution is demonstrating that Ciliz's leadership extends beyond technological vision; it is embedded in an environment marked by shareholder disputes, state intervention and tensions between innovation and labor restructuring. The research broadens digitalization literature by revealing how leaders in emerging economies face structural constraints that often redirect or limit innovation strategies. It also enriches corporate governance discourse by illustrating how institutional conflicts shape strategic decisions and organizational results. In addition, it offers practical insights by emphasizing that successful digitalization depends on aligning technological goals with institutional logics, regulatory pressures and internal power dynamics, thus providing a more nuanced and critical perspective on leadership in politically complex settings.

Kristin Williams' article, "Eileen Tallman-Sufrin (1913–1999): organizing Eaton's and organizing in Canada," describes another pivotal yet largely overlooked figure in Canadian society. We learn that Eileen Tallman-Sufrin was an early leader in the Canadian labor movement. Williams work focuses particularly on Tallman-Sufrin's leadership in the ambitious campaign to unionize workers at Eaton's, once one of Canada's largest and most influential retail employers headquartered in Toronto, the country's largest urban-center. Through archival sources and in Tallman-Sufrin's own writings, Williams introduces her ficto-feminist historical style (Williams, 2021) to critical biography method by reconstructing a fictitious interview with Tallman-Sufrin. She bridges criticism and narration while foregrounding the embodied and affective dimensions of feminist historiography. In doing so, the article demonstrates how critical biography can take on multiple narrative forms and writing styles while remaining grounded in rigorous historical inquiry. As with Ruel's recovery of Jelly in the Canadian space industry, Williams' study advocates for Tallman-Sufrin as a consequential but under-recognized figure whose work shaped labor organizing in Canada. Her work reminds us that, while it remains nearly impossible to know for certain, the impact Tallman-Sufrin had in organizing one department store has reverberated across the annals of Canadian labor history. Eileen Tallman-Sufrin's contributions to Canadian labor history continue to resonate. Beyond the union drive at Eaton's during the mid-20th century, Tallman-Sufrin's work in labor education and policy, including her writings on labor relations and her influential account *The Eaton Drive*, helped document and theorize the dynamics of organizing in service-sector workplaces.

In "Building a better world," Michael Zickar uncovers potential contradictions in the radical advocacy of writer Edward Bellamy. *Looking Backward* was a utopian novel whose protagonist awakes to discover an ostensibly egalitarian society which continues to exhibit hierarchical features. Zickar's critical biographical approach places Bellamy's career as a writer and journalist in social and historic context. *Looking Backward* inspired the creation of Nationalist Clubs across the country. Citizens of the era were undoubtedly taken by the vision of a country without poverty and inequality despite profound contradictions. Bellamy's utopia maintained racial segregation and endorsed eugenics, reflecting common 19th-century prejudices. Remarkably, major employers may have been influenced by Bellamy's writing in adopting bureaucratic innovations in human resource management as introduced in the text.

The editors hope that the readers will be convinced that critical biography represents a means to enhance the value and impact of management history scholarship. Most importantly, we hope that they will engage with the authors and topics of this Special Issue.

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