

# BIOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY: DILEMMAS AND OPPORTUNITIES

4<sup>th</sup> Annual Graduate Conference in European History

Central European University (Budapest)

Deadline for submissions:  
February 15, 2010.

Date: May 6-9, 2010.

Venue: Department of History, Central European University (H-1051, Nádor u. 11, Budapest).

Organizers: Central European University (Budapest) in co-operation with the European University Institute (Florence).

The working language of the conference is English. Please send a 300 word abstract and a brief CV in a single Word document to [graceh@ceu.hu](mailto:graceh@ceu.hu). Confirmation of receipt will be sent via email within seven days. If you do not receive an email of confirmation within this time frame, please re-send your abstract. Full papers will be pre-circulated, and we ask that all participants prepare a presentation of no more than 15 minutes to allow for discussion and questions. Final papers are due on April 15, 2010. Panels will be presided over by scholars who will comment on the papers as well as moderate discussion.

There will be no registration fee and lunches and coffee will be provided. Funding for travel and accommodation may be available on an individual basis based on request. Information regarding accommodation in Budapest will be sent along with notification of acceptance. For updates regarding the 2010 conference, please visit our website regularly (<http://graceh2010.wordpress.com/call-for-papers>).

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Think that biography is an outmoded genre that should be relegated to the fringes of historical research? Think again. John Donne wrote, »No man is an island,« and in recent scholarship, historians have reflected on biography as a sophisticated genre capable of making broader theoretical contributions (e.g. *AHR* and *Ab Imperio* forums in 2009). Scholars can interpret and employ biography in innovative ways. Yet, one of the challenges facing biographers is the revision of some of the notions central to the genre – such as ›identity‹, ›subjectivity‹ or ›agency‹ – brought about by the linguistic turn and other theoretical developments in human sciences. The 2010 Graduate Conference in European History (GRACEH) seeks submissions that use biography to interrogate the concept of identity, as well as papers addressing methodological and epistemological issues regarding the genre. Case studies exemplifying the wider theoretical discussion will also be considered.

Given the ambiguity of many historians towards biography, this conference is organized around the assumption that there are important issues raised by the entanglements between biography and theoretical conceptualizations of identity. In current scholarship, an essentialist notion of identity has made way for a constructivist idea – identities as multiple, fluid, in constant flux – which challenges the usefulness of the term ›identity‹, and makes way for other clusters of analytical concepts. But, can biographical research absorb these theoretical and methodological contributions? Can it interrogate and refine analytical categories such as race, class and gender, and reflect on older questions of agency and social structure? Can there be ›biography‹ beyond ›identity‹? And if so, which are the epistemological and methodological issues, the challenges and traps of biography?

Furthermore, there is debate on what defines biography. Some historians adapted a key-notion – the life cycle – to non-human subjects, while others have »redefined« the »bio« element of »biography« in convergence with studies on »bio-politics«. Others have used non-textual sources to make insights into the lives of people who left little textual evidence. There are also those who have taken a broader view on the genesis of western conceptualizations of history, identifying biography as the main source behind the development of the notion of homogeneous time. All these have found their echo in a wide-range of methodologies and approaches including, but not limited to oral history, psycho-history, archeology, comparison, trans-national history, micro-history, and *histoire croisée*. We welcome papers on all of these topics, as well as reflections on theoretical framings of biography in other fields, like feminist theory, gender studies, post-colonial studies, and other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and literature.

The conference focuses on the wider European space from the Medieval to the Contemporary historical period. We take a broad thematic focus, inviting contributions that integrate biography into debates about identity, as well as case studies that utilize novel approaches to biography. Contributions on shared biographies and ego-history – opportunities for wider discussions of identity of both the subject and scholar – are also encouraged. We welcome submissions that probe the boundaries of discipline and methodology, but also question the very definition of the genre.

Keeping in mind the afore-mentioned priorities, possible themes for the 2010 GRACEH may include, but are not limited to paper submissions on the following topics. We also encourage the submission of panels:

- Defining Biography after Constructivism:
  - o Is biographical illusion necessary? Fluidity of boundaries and boundaries of fluidity in historical representations of subjectivity.
  - o Biography and the non-human subject.
  - o Gender, Sexuality, and Biography.
  - o History of subjectivity and experience: »neo-phenomenological« approaches to human lives.
  - o Historicize or memorize? Biography and the history-memory debate.
  - o Interdisciplinarity and biography.

- Biography and Multiple Subjects:
  - o Comparative biography, »Collective Biography«, and »Shared Lives«: writing the history of generations, institutions, and society.
  - o Mapping new meanings of the ›multiple‹: groups, structures, networks.
- »Biographopolitics«:
  - o The political utility of biography: regimes, subjectivity and regimes of subjectivity.
  - o Biography and bio-power.
  - o Biography as exemplary life vs. history ›from below‹.
- Biography as »Historian's Craft«:
  - o Sources, narrative techniques and self-reflexivity in biographical writing.
  - o Biography as historiography.
  - o Autobiography and ego-history.



This year's conference will have four keynote speakers: Willem Frijhoff (Emeritus/honorary professor of Early Modern History, Vrije Universiteit), Niels Gaul (Associate Professor in the CEU Medieval Studies Department, and Director of the Center for Hellenic Traditions), Biljana Kašić (Professor at the University of Zadar, Rijeka, and Zagreb; Coordinator of the Centre for Women's Studies, Zagreb), István Rév (Professor in the CEU History Department, and Director of the Open Society Archives). Furthermore, participants will also have the opportunity of interacting with CEU professors who will be moderating the discussion on each panel.

