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Life-history, and the Puerto Rican circuit


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BARRY LEVINE, sociologist editor of Caribbeán Review, has produced twenty-three chapters relating episodes in the life of a Puerto Rican emigrant, Benji López. In addition to the first-person narrative, the book contains Levine's Introduction and an Epilogue that attempts to discuss "the Historical Development of the Puerto Rican Circuit."

In his Introduction, Levine attacks the mechanistic concepts of traditional sociology, in which the actor is merely a product of the social world. But his critique tends toward a reductio ad absurdum, and fails to offer plausible theoretical alternatives. The author contrasts two polar operational models: the actor as free agent and the actor as determined by society. His difficulties emerge from this unfortunate dichotomy, which limits his ability to consider other logical possibilities — for example, an actor capable of pondering his/her actions and circumstances, but at the same time engaged in an ongoing dialectic of change with the culture and society from which he/she comes.

Levine's concern with avoiding facile explanations is laudable, but in so doing it is not necessary to reject all social explanation. He could, for example, have made good use of some of the recent advances in information processing, decision-making and other related disciplines (Märtensson 1979; Carlstein et al. 1978; Center for Human Information Processing 1979). Such efforts are directed in part at defining the sphere and compass of human agency. They seek to avoid the linear determinism of both behavioral and voluntarist approaches, while simultaneously considering the restrictions imposed by the social environment.

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Social scientists have the task of placing the life of persons in specific situations and contexts, while looking for the “vitality” Levine seeks, but avoiding abstraction and naïve forms of cultural relativism. To achieve this, Levine’s odiun theologicum towards explanation must be transcended. Social explanation need not suffer from automatic causalism; to strive for understanding is not to be infected with some malefic miasma. After all, Levine’s Epilogue also attempts to explain, although he ends up with a distorted picture of the Puerto Rican world, one which even carefully omits the term “colonial” (p. 180–199).

Benjy's author seems to have missed a few lessons from others who have collected and utilized life-histories for social science analysis. The first is the importance of the distinction between capturing “the dynamic pulse of life” as a novelist or as a social scientist. While the novelist provides us with instances of the vicissitudes of a life trajectory through time and place, it is done as the artistic expression of an aesthetic canon. The social scientist, on the other hand, strives for understanding through some sort of explanation. As Marinello has aptly put it: “The novelist’s task is not to explain but to show [evidenciar]” (1977: 242). Even though both the novelist and the sociologist can utilize the biographical genre, the boundaries that separate their respective métiers are far more defined than Levine concedes.

Since both novelist and sociologist can relish the presentation of narratives that are aesthetically pleasing, the difference appears to reside not in their styles, but in their respective goals. Both can also concern themselves with the contexts in which their characters exist — see, for example, Carpentier 1967. What distinguishes the social scientist from the artist is the attempt to explain, and the adherence to an explicit method. In the case of biography or testimonial literature, this absolutely requires an elaboration of the process that led to the final text or narrative. Dealing with an empirical reality in the form of a first-person narrative, the social scientist must make public the methods and process that led to it, to allow others the possibility of evaluating and weighing the result (Denzin 1970: 31). The novelist, even when writing a story based in real events, has no such obligation.

Levine presents us with an attractive plot and captures our
attention with the antics of his anti-hero, but for sociology this is not quite sufficient. Rather than producing a book that will — in his words — “celebrate interdisciplinary emphases,” Levine seems to have led us into a disciplinary No-Man’s land, halfway between fiction and social science.  

The author’s critique of earlier theories of life-history seems opportune. Dollard (1949), for example, though a pioneer in the field, had previously been reassessed largely in terms of the controversies generated by Blumer (1939), discussing Thomas & Znienicki’s classic work (1918–20). And there had been little critical discussion of more recent work like Langness (1975), Erikson (1975), and Lipton (1974). However, Levine does not ultimately provide us with options that take into consideration the dialectical conception of the process of living in the social world and innovating at the same time. To liberate us from these conceptions, new approaches still need to be developed. (There is some evidence that Europeans are picking up where the Chicago School left us — see Bertaux 1981, and the continued use of the pamietniki in Poland for the last 60 years.)

The second lesson offered by the life-history and biographical literature in the social sciences is summarized by Mintz (1979), who refers us to two crucial points applicable to both ethnography and life-history. First, the selection of the protagonist’s actions must be “culturally significant.” And second, emphasis must be placed on a careful awareness of the relationship between scientist and informant: observations without an observer are simply an illusion. Mintz’s first point advances the distinction between mere chance or extraordinary event and the usual/modal way in which social events emerge and follow a course in a given context. This is a particularly crucial issue in the case of emigrants who separate themselves from their past in time and place. That separation does not preclude the fact that their cultural background “continues its manifestation in perception and articulation” (Mintz 1973); the relative impact of the migrant’s background is central and must be addressed. A final point pertaining to Mintz’s “lesson” is Benjy’s representativeness. There are certainly many Benjys among Puerto Ricans, just as there are characters like those Oscar Lewis made famous through La Vida (1966);
however, Levine’s assertion that Benjy López constitutes “the Puerto Rican personality” is a true non-sequitur (see p. xxxii). Levine also leaves to our imagination the process by which he edited Benjy’s narrative into chapter form. For example, was it recorded or partially written by the informant? And in what contexts did the informant prefer to use English or Spanish? Neither are we told much about the relationship between sociologist and informant; the result is that Benjy and his editor become one whenever the reader attempts to understand more than the events reported. In this context, Mintz’s quotation of Condominas on “la nécessité d’ethnographier les ethnographes” takes on special relevance (1979: 22).

A third lesson offered by first-person literature in the social sciences concerns the relevance of cultural themes, and their survival and modification through time and in different contexts. Although Benjy’s life-history offers us themes which are intimately linked to his class of origin and to his aspirations, Levine makes no use of them, nor does he follow up the leads of scholars working in the fields of anthropology and cognitive psychology (for example, Kelly 1955; Agar 1980; D’Andrade 1981).

Although biography is periodically rediscovered by social scientists, it seems that certain crucial implications of this method have been best assimilated in Europe. The recent special edition of Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie (69, 1980) provides us with a panoramic view of oral and life-history studies. A decade ago, Caro-Baroja (1970: 11) also warned us:

If a non-fiction biography [no novelada] is to serve any purpose, it is precisely to try to show the insertion of that which is individual and personal into that which is social [las acciones generales] . . . as well as to demonstrate how the weight of the general actions, collective and even extra-human, leaving aside for the time being providentialisms and religious fatalism, gravitates on all of us, great and small. The task of biography is as scientific as any other historical endeavor or, if one wishes, as unscientific. It is one of the great humanistic crafts of all times . . .

The several points above illustrate the complexities of interpreting an individual world-view that results from the articulation of supra-individual and strictly personal forces. They are indispensable lessons for a critical appraisal of Benjy López.

Levine explicitly defines Benjy as a “picaresque” character. In
picaresque literature not all heroes are redeemed; some are prisoners of a double bind, and others are presented as inherently unworthy. In the first case, the character is trapped, and must choose between survival and integrity; in the second case, the character is portrayed as socially determined, in a simplistic sociology which neither Levine nor this writer would accept. The authors of picaresque works, from Lazarillo and El Buscón through Simplicissimus and Moll Flanders, reveal behind the conventions of a literary genre implicit premises about life. Such literary expressions have characteristically occurred during transitional moments of European history, particularly when bourgeois individualism can be exalted.

The form of the picaresque presents a paradigmatic confrontation between the individual and a hostile society. The narrative is episodic, opened to all sorts of possibilities in which a protagonist belonging to a subordinate social sector tries to survive by utilizing shrewdness, and travels through several social groups (with great attention paid to the transit through the most corrupt sectors of the society in which the picaro lives). To be fair to the picaro, one must acknowledge that he has not always been depicted as a dissimulating conformist, as an unrepentant pessimist, as a cynic or even as an unscrupulous vagabond. The picaro has also emerged as a bearer of moral lessons, serving the purpose of counterposing irreconcilable ideological viewpoints. Beyond all these, the picaro gave great impetus to the myth of the individualism of the dispossessed. Benjy does seem to fit the general tradition of the picaresque; what we must elucidate is Levine’s presuppositions.

Benjy moves in a world of hypocrisy; he searches for meaning and safety in a society that proclaims sacred traditions while condoning the most degrading actions. He is presented as a person who has come down to a lower station, even though his previous one was not particularly exalted. The son of a small-time sharecropper who attempted to ward off exploitation by vicariously playing landlord, he develops ambivalent feelings towards his father. He grows into a marginal character who does not inherit a place that he can claim as his own, nor a trade or position that would facilitate the elaboration of a coherent life-strategy. Prematurely pushed to fend for himself, he soon discovers the utility of
interpersonal exploitation, losing his innocence under the tutelage of the Armed Forces. Without any resources beyond his natural intelligence and underhanded maneuvering, he is unable fully to cope and attempts, variously, the strategy of serving several masters, inventing multiple statagems, and utilizing innumerable identity masks during a peripatetic life that alternates between good and bad fortune. That is the synthesis of Benjy López; the thread of a picaresque plot is woven.

LEVINE adopts a voluntaristic position to interpret Benjy, but this seems a misguided attempt to avoid dealing with those very values and conceptions learned by Benjy that so often lead him to a no-exit situation. In each of Benjy’s efforts there is a paradoxical conformity — for example, when he rebels against military authority, when he mimics the stereotypical Cuban chulo, when he briefly becomes a university student, when he turns salesman, and particularly; when he thinks he has outmaneuvered the FBI. Neither LEVINE nor Benjy can escape the quagmire of the “Puerto Rican connection” with its fluidity and abundance of apparent liberties.

LEVINE subtracts verisimilitude from his Benjy López when he compares him to a modern literary anti-hero. For, Benjy is not a contemporary version of Augie March. We cannot disengage him from the cultural tradition from which he comes. The prototype of the “activist” in North American literature that LEVINE would like to apply to Benjy is simply not adequate. Perhaps a better parallel can be established with the rootless adventurers who flourished during the early European conquest of the Americas. Instead of Augie March, we might think of Alonso de Contreras (16th–17th centuries), himself a master of the unfinished enterprise in an enigmatic world. De Contreras, like Benjy, considered himself the mere instrument of an unknown destiny. Lacking all internal discipline, even though acknowledging the control of external forces, he finds sufficient reason to cast away all “respect.” (I am not here referring to respeto as mere obedience, so common a confusion in Puerto Rican society, as LEVINE perceptively recognizes.) If de Contreras was the adventurer of the Thirty Years’ War, Benjy López is the adventurer of the Second Puerto Rican Colony. Both share a parallel destiny, a spiritless
fate. They are frontier men, living simultaneously in two worlds. Being tight-rope walkers, they often fall into what they most desire to avoid. As so often happens between oppressors and oppressed, they engage in a duel of reciprocal dehumanization. If de Contreras’ preferred strategy was reaction, Benjy’s is rebelliousness. Neither are revolutionaries. Being rebels, they have a cause; nevertheless, they fail to turn their resentment into redemption and, thus, remain at the level of individualism. Pained by their bad luck, they personify in the long run the prototype of the petit-bourgeois. Adventurers from the start, they lack the gift of foresight and imagination so well implied in the Spanish term visiónario. Ortega y Gasset (1967:30), that great bourgeois who resented anything small-minded in his class, wrote of de Contreras:

The vocation of the adventurer is paradoxical: it is the vocation of having no vocation. [His] life is [for him] hiding and fleeing [a salto de mata], an epic made only of episodes. Threads of existence that form not a stance. Almost daily, they move into one life only to be reborn to another . . . . [His life is] made up of disconnected fragments of twenty different heroes. Hence, he is always starting and always finishing.

Benjy and de Contreras suffer from the atrophy of their reflective capacities in spite of the fact that both have conversant familiarity with the literary works of their times. Their adolescent ruminations may simultaneously lack self-restraint and achieve profundity. Unpremeditated action leads them to all sorts of encounters—they act first, and only later attempt to figure out what has happened. We can concur with Levine when he says that Benjy lives by “wit, will and words” (p. xxii; the translation into Spanish is less glamorous: ingenio, voluntarioso albedrío y palabrería). Both, as Pope (1974: 153) claims of the Contreras,

respond to the pivotal forces of the times: the power of the empire along with the economic chaos which advances as defense for the individual, pride, the pleasure for travel and adventure and the inheritance of principle . . . in conflict with the modern state.

The fact that both figures emerged in moments of acute transition is also worth noting.

Levine suggests that “losers” are not good subjects for biography. The implications of this proposal are troubling. To identify “winners” or “success stories” we would need to bring to
our studies conceptual baggage much more weighty than a pad and pencil. And we always run the risk of defining winners and losers in conformity with the criteria of the dominant sectors of the society. Levine does not contemplate this because he does not elaborate an analysis of the class structure and ideologies within which Benjy contrives his plots. It is from a particular ideological position that Benjy is able to conclude that he is a winner. Lauria (1980: 298), describing Puerto Rican transformations and class situations, has pointed toward the need to address

the form in which the subordinate sectors not only continue elaborating cultural elements of their past trajectory, but also how they make use of elements imposed by the dominant sectors which are re-elaborated according to their class needs... We maintain that the petit-bourgeoisie still maintains its presence in Puerto Rico — particularly at the level of the ideology of daily life praxis of the popular classes in the diverse forms of their aspirations, tastes, values, self-images, patterns of interaction and manipulations at home, in the streets, the neighborhoods and the work places.

Benjy’s family and class background can help us to understand his actions (though Levine might not be sympathetic to this idea), particularly where his oscillations intersect with conformity — see, for example, p. 7–8 on his early life; p. 144, where he expresses his opinions on working conditions; or p. 145, where he moralizes about police corruption in New York. His use of the theme of respeto is very much congruent with the “conforming” sectors of the Puerto Rican population.

Just as Quintero-Rivera (1979) has described for sectors of the popular classes in Puerto Rico, Benjy develops a pragmatic philosophy that blurs his praxis (“...everything finally gets down to economics” [p. 133]). His recurrent preference for cunning and his “ingratiatory agility” (agilidad congraciante, a term Lauria has used to describe that strategy [1980: 304]), is clearly linked to a rigid social stratification. His scorn for the Gringo officers and his resistance to military regimentation lead him to fleeting insights: “I used to listen to a lot of guys ... talking about de Hostos, about Puerto Rico, against the yankees and stuff like that.... I began to have other thoughts too, to hate the United States” (p. 33). Nevertheless, he tries to solve the increasing conflict by drinking: “I started to get drunk, and drunk and drunk” (p. 33). Only fleeting rebelliousness, really. His wish is to escape, to get out, but
he knows not where. In those moments of confusion he is entranced by the colonial illusion that paves North American streets with gold. His insular and colonial vision persists: he is overwhelmed upon seeing the vastness of the Mississippi (p. 37). It would be too easy to conclude that his attitude toward North America is a simple identification with the aggressor. It is undoubtedly something more complex, though possessing some element of that mechanism of defense.

His last recourse is to continue his career of marginality. Before being taken as a colonial to the European war front, Benjy says: “I was both anti-Puerto Rican and anti-American. I didn’t want to go back to Puerto Rico but I didn’t think I should go and fight” (p. 57). Or when he contrasts his background with what he perceives as the effect of migration: “But we were different. With us there was a difference in culture, behavior and upbringing . . . . Maybe their minds [referring to fellow migrants] got so, I don’t say corrupted, but broken down by the economic situation” (p. 67). His ambivalence toward the values of his tradition is expressed in multiple passages: “I was brought up — in spite of everything — to respect human beings” (p. 57). The tension of the still unresolved conflict between class and nation appears throughout his narrative, especially when he is faced with issues of ethnic and class identity.

It is in this tension that we may find the key to understanding Benjy López. Bonilla (1980: 161), evaluating the biography of another Puerto Rican emigrant, reminds us:

With the Memorias de Bernardo Vega we have another example, a very well-documented one, of Puerto Rican proletarian consciousness, of a clear vision of a class united both at the level of patriotic feeling as well as with an internationalist disposition and action that are firm and consistent.

When we contrast Benjy López with Bernardo Vega (Andreu Iglesias 1977), with Taso (Mintz 1960) or with the journalistic memoirs of Jesús Colón (1975), his is a pathetic profile. (It should be noted that Levine does not acknowledge Vega’s memoir, rejects Taso’s life simply because of his religious conversion to Protestantism, and does not bother to mention Colón’s work as a committed marxist in New York). Bernardo Vega achieves resolution of the antinomy class-nation, while Benjy López only
adopts an old chauvinistic cliché which refers to the "nostalgia of a long-lost happiness." In Benjy, to refer again to Bonilla (1980:163) regarding the Puerto Rican diaspora:

National and class struggles are intermixed through time and space in a most dynamic framework. In summary, the most pessimistic expectations on the capacity of penetration of bourgeois ideology among the working class are fulfilled, as well as the variety of situations in which this class would pointlessly sacrifice its own interests in the name of the nation or in exchange for modest reforms.

Benjy López must be taken seriously by social scientists, even though we might not support the particular brand of first-person sociology Levine espouses. He represents new expressions of the old class divisions in Puerto Rican society which José Luis González has interpreted in his El país de los cuatro pisos (1980). Benjy rejects his popular origin and ends up identifying with the ideology of the dominant classes of our agrarian tradition; he embraces that which he considers to be closest to the seignorial style of by-gone days: "I had five top coats, $150 top coats" (p. 110). When he meets the racial issue, with all the multiple nuances of both his worlds, he turns cynical and loses the opportunity of opening up to solidarity. He even justifies racism, as seen in his reflections on Texas (p. 173).

According to Levine, emigration has "modernized" Benjy; he can now feel equal to those characters idealized in our society (see p. 119-120). Upon his return to the island, he ends up accommodating to his rediscovered colony and adopts what he perceives to be the best kind of respectability. In a revisionist turn, he reflects on his early escapades: "... but never was Puerto Rico this bad," he tells us when he remembers his past. After flirting with the pro-independence leaders as a proof of his recently acquired "equality," and leaving his FBI dossier in order, he adopts the role of successful return-migrant and prodigal son. Cleansed of old inequalities, he shares the colonial illusion of power. In Benjy's mind, the illusion is real: he even feels himself to be Nelson Rockefeller's equal.

In his own words: "I am a fuckin' internationalist, who's been splashed" (p. 185). Just like Moll Flanders, Benjy abandons the strict idealization of "important" personages by becoming one of them.

Benjy, inadvertently, also tells us something about Levine.
NOTES


2. An example of contrasting results are Barnett's two testimonial works: La Canción de Rachel (1970), a testimonial-novel which reminds us of Lewis' method, and his non-fictionalized Biografía de un Cimarrón (1968). In the first, the hybrid form entertains and liberates a kind of prose but contributes little to a sociological understanding of Cuban society. In contrast, the second, hardly elaborated beyond the ex-slave's narrative, will maintain a significant place in contributing to an understanding of marronage and slavery in the Caribbean.

3. This does not seem to have been the goal of most life-histories of Puerto Ricans, including that by Lewis, whose objective was to advance his concept of the "culture of poverty." See also Mintz 1960; Sheehan 1976; Rettig et al. 1977; Randall 1979; or even the earliest document collected in 1690 by Sigüenza y Góngora (1967).

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