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## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest within political science in political biography, especially as it bears on political leaders and followers. Individuals are more than ever in focus in political science, methodologically and substantively. And the mass media concentrate overwhelmingly on individuals in reporting current events. Where there is politics, there is biography.

It was my great pleasure to chair the Workshop on Political Biography at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research held at the University of the Ruhr, Bochum, Germany, in April 1990. The papers from that workshop, collected here, represent a wide variety of approaches to biography, and a highly divergent choice of biographical subjects. The reader can expect to find detailed discussion of a perhaps surprising array of real problems facing biographers, as in the workshop theory and practice were constantly juxtaposed.

Amongst these problems I would merely mention the following, by way of introducing the range of issues that arose in the workshop. The way biographers choose and justify their subject matter is a classical problem. Does one choose a "great" leader or "mere" follower? How should autobiography be treated? To what extent ought one to solicit it? The way biographers relate personally to their subjects in life or through the archive is another relevant issue. Does one cultivate sympathy or keep the subject and other interested parties at a distance? There are gains and losses either way.

Further, the way biographers orient their work to their subjects' current roles in politics is important. Does one write so as to make an icon or alternatively to mount an exposé? Political leaders, and their followers, have obvious interests here in guiding and manipulating biographers. And the way biographers attempt to influence their audiences must also be considered. Does one generate a "good read" or attempt to intervene in contemporary political life? Participants in the workshop held decidedly different views on that point.

Finally, the way biographers envisage and represent chronological time proved a subject of enduring interest. Ought one to stay in the traditional "birth-to-death" frame or to attempt some thematic treatment? How is biographical prose most effectively related to chronological time? "Whose time?" became an issue, as time can be perceived very differently by different individuals. And the way biographers handle personal or private

matters in relation to public and political ones provided some light but well argued relief. Is there a public realm of politics that can be separated in biography from a private or personal domain? Or is everything personal necessarily political for the biographer? Quite different views were expressed.

Biography has proved to be an important focus for communication within and about political science. Modern biographers draw on a tradition at least as old as Plutarch, but they also reach out to contemporary studies in the social sciences and humanities for inspiration and resources. There is hardly anything so important, and so human, as the life of the *zoon politikon*, and the way it is conceptualized in biography.

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