

Kitabiyat/Book Reviews

Historicizing Life-Writing and Egodocuments in Early Modern Europe

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BATUHAN AKSU

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi
Boğaziçi University, The Institute for Graduate Studies in Social Sciences, MA Student

(aksuubatuhan@gmail.com), ORCID: 0009-0009-9645-4800

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Historicizing Life-Writing and Egodocuments in Early Modern Europe, edited by James R. Farr of Purdue University and Guido Ruggiero of Miami University, aims to historicize two anthropocentric genres in the context of Early Modern Europe in three parts. "Life-Writing," which has not yet been used in Turkish literature, is a new concept that aims to analyze all texts that include human memories and experiences and that makes use of different branches from psychology to literature in this direction. "Ego-documents" (or self-narratives), on the other hand, are sources where the subject, written and depicted, has a permanent presence in the text, revealing or hiding on purpose or by accident, according to Jacques Presser, who introduced this term to literature in the 1950s.¹ Despite the close relationship

1 Rudolf Dekker, ed. *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical Writing in its Context since the Middle Ages*, (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002): 7.

between the two modes of writing, the two editors indicate the lack of studies that deal with them in the crucible of the discipline of history, and the book aims to further historicize the field of "Life-Writing" by introducing a historical analysis of self-narratives (p. 2). Because both fields examine the individual, who is essentially a social actor, this element becomes a valuable tool for historiography by synthesizing their data.

In the introduction, the editors emphasize that ego-documents enable us to treat individuals as independent social actors without losing sight of the sociocultural context but not being condemned to it. The editors reject Jacob Burckhardt's claim that with the Renaissance, individuals get rid of their social context and use their free will willingly and Stephen Greenblatt's argument that people are not free and that the precise determination of social conditions forms individuals. Instead, as the other goal of the work, contrary to these two opposing arguments, they propose to emphasize the role of both the subject and social habitus in forming individuality, selfhood, and self-identity. According to them, it is possible to watch both the effects of social norms on individuals and their reactions to the social norms they encounter in ego-documents, which are a unique tool for them. Ego-documents also offer unique insights into self-identity and self-construction. On the other hand, these are not just individual texts because the sociocultural rules of the place and time in which they were written shape the content of these works. The author who prepares them imagines a reader/audience community and kneads his work according to their expectations.

Three essays in the book's first chapter, "The Self Theorized from a Historical Perspective," attempt to formulate the Problem of the Self (the problem of personal identity construction), from a historical perspective. Discussing Montaigne's essays in the first article, John Martin draws attention to the fluidity and variability of the famous essayist's ego-documents. In this context, Martin states that selves emerged in the "relational model" in the Early Modern period. In other words, selves construct a polyvalent self that changes according to time and space by constantly making its relations with them throughout life, without being a prisoner of sociocultural elements in their relations with their societies. In the second article, Douglas Biow, agreeing with Martin's thoughts, states that Vasari, the famous biographer of the Renaissance, found a relational model constantly changing and developing in his communication with the world and his ideas about

himself. Finally, in the last article, Benvenuto Cellini argues that ego-documents reveal a “consensus reality” in the Early Modern period. In other words, in this period, individuals enter into negotiations with various groups that surround them, and they build many selves under the wings of the historical moment, socioeconomic boundaries, and human imagination, but as a result, by expanding the field of their own existence. That is, the so-called “Renaissance” man, contrary to the claims of mainstream historiography, lacks a monolithic individuality and has multi-stratified selves due to variable negotiations with different groups.

After this theoretical background, the book’s second part, “Historical Approaches to Egodocuments: Strengths and Doubts”, turns to a more practical issue and tries to reveal the strengths and possible drawbacks of the self-narratives. In the first article, James S. Amelang discusses the formation of complex but disintegrated selves in the age of confessionalization through the autobiographies of two Spanish priests who changed their sects and places. However, he also mentions the traps that the propaganda and exaggerations in these texts will cause for historiography. In the following article, Silvia Z. Mitchell takes up the memories of a Jesuit and states that it is a self-justifying ego-document. In the third article, Rudolf Dekker looks at the diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr., the secretary of King William III of England. He discusses how the secretary revealed himself and his negotiations with the society in which he lived. In the fourth article of the chapter, Benjamin Marschke draws attention to the pitfalls in the ego-documents of Frederick William I, King of Prussia. In the final piece of the chapter, James R. Farr compares the self-narratives of two eighteenth-century British thinkers, implying the development of different selves.

The final chapter of the book, “Pushing the Limits of Life-Writing with a Wider Range of Historical Sources”, attempts to question the limits of Life Writing and Ego-documents and aims to show the inclusion of different genres in these categories. In the first essay, Deanna Shemek emphasizes the richness of ego-documents by looking at the Early Modern Italian letter collections and looking at the stylistic changes that the intellectuals of the period made in their own representations according to the degree of sincerity of the negotiations with their interlocutors in the letters they sent to different people. On the other hand, Mary Lindemann argues that Dutch commercial notary records should be considered as self-narratives, even if they

do not have a classical self-representation and narrative structure, since they allow people to reconstruct their lives by reaching their thoughts. In the book's final essay, Mihoko Suzuki examines the letters of a countess and a duchess to examine how women describe themselves and their surroundings in their self-reports.

As a fruit of collective brainstorming, this work naturally has many convincing points and questionable weaknesses. I can identify that the most potent aspect of the book is the diversity and richness of the sources used. From letters to diaries, many genres that can be defined as "ego-documents" have been masterfully evaluated by different authors. Moreover, these sources have a holistic and constructive contribution to support the book's central tenets. It is possible to follow the book's main points from different angles between the changing parts and chapters. While explaining the significance and value of self-narratives, the work also brings to the field many notions, from consensus reality and polyvalent self. The book also strengthens its persuasiveness with its moderate proposal on Buckhardt and Greenblatt's fringe ideas on forming the human self in the Early Modern period.

However, I do not consider ego-documents explored in the work to be sufficiently democratic. The owners of the narratives are overwhelmingly Western European kings, elites, and intellectuals. Except for Suzuki's article, no women's ego-document is included. Moreover, none of the different groups seen as threats, marginalized, and prosecuted in any piece have a directly mentioned self-narrative. Nonetheless, as microhistorical studies have shown for decades, records of people from the lower strata of society, from Miller Menocchio to Martin Guerre, are accessible, despite being less than the upper strata.

At the very least, documents from the Inquisition or witch trials could have been valuable resources in many ways, revealing how inmates self-realized and negotiated with other parts of society. Such sources could have also enriched the content of the work by democratizing it. Also, although it is normal for this book to focus on the Early Modern European world, at some points, some relevance and parallels could be drawn through ego-documents in other civilizations as well. Unfortunately, it is also difficult to find traces of the "other" conceptions of different civilizations and societies in the ego-documents of the individuals mentioned in the work. Eventually,

while the articles in the work beautifully convey the sociocultural and political background in which self-narratives are written, it neglects the role of geographical and economic conditions in forming ego-documents (except for Lindemann's article).

While reading the work, it can be said that some elements can provide new perspectives on self-narratives in Ottoman historiography. For example, Shemek's treatment of letters in the Italian Renaissance as ego-documents reminded me of the *münşe'ât mecmû'aları* (letter collections) in the Ottoman world, which Christine Woodhead dealt with skillfully. Just like the prose writers of the Renaissance, studies can be conducted on the polyvalent selves in the styles of the owners, which vary according to their addressees. Or, interregional comparisons can be drawn between Amelang's article on the ego-documents of two converts in the age of confessionalization and the self-narratives embedded in the works of individuals whose selves changed as they changed places in the Ottoman world during the same period.

All in all, *Historicizing Life-Writing and Egodocuments in Early Modern Europe* is an enjoyable and promising read for those who are interested in Early Modern European history and ego-documents in terms of its proposals and determinations, despite several deficiencies that can be detected in all works. Although academic debates will continue from many perspectives on the nature and boundaries of both life-writing and ego-documents, this work will retain its value as one of the first steps toward historicizing the findings of these two crucial modes of writing.