

• MINIATURES •

Four Arguments for Microhistory

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‘God is in the details’. Flaubert’s aphorism is often recalled when speaking about microhistory, the intensive historical investigation of a small area.¹ Today microhistory is the flagship of contemporary social historians, taking over from historical anthropology, and being intertwined with new cultural history. In my view, we should not call the results of an investigation of a small area microhistory unless the historian’s objective is to find answers to his questions through the micro-investigation itself rather than just to illustrate statements deduced by other methods. This approach is perceptibly more and more widespread among historians.² Is this only an ephemeral fashion or does this fascination with detail really give more to the reader than traditional social history?

Similarly to classical Greek plays, where we can find a threefold unity of place, time and action, the microhistorical approach creates a focal point, and in this focus the subject of the historical investigation can be studied with an intensity unparalleled in studies about nations, states or social groupings, stretching over decades, centuries or whatever *longue durée*. In what follows, I try to give four arguments for micro-oriented social history. I think that it has a clear advantage over macro-oriented traditional social history owing to its four characteristics: it is appealing to the general public, it is realistic, it conveys personal experience and whatever it has in its focus, the lines branching out from this reach very far.

If we are on the level of the ‘little facts’ of history, which are drawn directly from the sources, for example, that a certain battle took place on a certain day and not earlier or later, the historian’s statements can be challenged and proved or refuted, so we can say that these are true – at least as a consensus of the scholarly community. If everyone in the field accepts that the battle of Hastings took place on 14 October 1066, the outsider can safely accept this as a truth. But these statements are not important, significance is attributed to them by historians in their interpretations, another level, and these cannot be proved right or wrong. These are narratives equally valuable in themselves in so far as they correspond to the most important professional criterion, that they do not contradict the ‘little facts’ of the sources. The competition of scholarly interpretations happens in an arena defined by power relationships. When history is regarded as a series of competing interpretations and not as

final truth, we can recall Jorge Luis Borges saying that reality can allow itself to be grey, but hypotheses must be interesting (Borges 1986: 144). The story of Menocchio or Martin Guerre has beyond doubt appeal. This gives the first advantage to microhistory over traditional structure-oriented social history. Being interesting is significant because this makes history readable for a public wider than the group of historians themselves – and this makes it enjoyable for them as well.

History is, however, more than just reading. The specificity of history when compared to the other ‘verbal fictions’ (Hayden White) is that it must be based on the ‘little facts.’ Microhistory is necessarily built more directly on the ‘little facts’ of the sources than traditional social history and it is more concrete. It can therefore rely much more firmly on what Roland Barthes called ‘reality effect’ (*l’effet de réel*).³ The closer relation to the ‘little facts’ entails a stronger reality, a second characteristic of microhistory. As Siegfried Kracauer wrote, microhistory gives a more real history (Kracauer 1971: 115). ‘In microhistory the reader feels that he is coming directly to the people of the past, closer than it is otherwise possible in historical studies’, argues Palle Ove Christiansen as well (Christiansen 1995: 9).⁴ In a world in which there are so many equally legitimate truths, telling one more is not of much importance. It is perhaps more promising to try to get close to reality.

Kracauer, an advocate of microhistory prior to the Italian *microstoria* (Medick 1996: 30), also wants the historian to give the reader the opportunity to learn (Kracauer 1971: 115). Modern social history has placed the experience (*expérience, gelebtes Leben*) of real human beings to the centre of its attention (Iggers 1997: 97). The third advantage of microhistory is that it can convey the lived experience to readers directly on the micro-level of everyday life. It seems to be an example of what Raymond Martin has claimed, that it is possible to ‘interpret experience on the level of experience’ (Martin 1997: 14), perhaps we can try to generalize in the case itself, as suggested by Clifford Geertz (1994: 194).⁵

If historians present a single case, it can have appeal, be realistic and can convey real experience, the relationship between micro and macro levels; the representation of the case remains, however, problematic. People live their lives in several contexts simultaneously, and I think that if historians present them in no more than one of these, the presentation will be false when measured by the whole, which cannot ever be presented: false, because it is just a fraction of it, and false because historians are inevitably influenced by their personal agenda in presenting this fraction and not any other possible one. Historians should therefore make an attempt to reconstruct life in each of these contexts, or, to be realistic, in as many of these as possible – thus also giving less room to their agenda, presuppositions and preconceptions to exert a distorting effect.⁶ Each of the contexts in which the person or community

examined is presented forms a part of their world, showing a different aspect of it. I believe that the advantage of the microhistorical approach is that it can present this diversity of contexts within the frame of a relatively limited investigation. It is in this way that the level of the individual case and the level of the general will be linked: while these contexts are presented, the fabric of society may also be re-constructed. What we can gain is not only the more intimate knowledge of a person, but that of a past society as well. Microhistory, therefore, has as its fourth asset the characteristic, that it is never isolated from the level of the general, and it will always have a bearing to that, even though I do not think that within one and the same investigation, the scale of observation could be changed. The roots of the tree of the single event branch out to weave through a significant part of the soil of past.⁷ The Hungarian writer, Sándor Márai wrote: 'Details are sometimes very important . . . they bind the whole.' (Márai 1998: 57). As Johann Wolfgang Goethe remarked to Eckermann speaking about the peculiar ('*das Besondere*'), a key concept of art: 'And you need not fear lest what is peculiar should not meet with sympathy. Each character, however peculiar it may be, and each object you can represent, from the stone up to the man, has generality' (Eckermann 1930: 17; 29 October 1823).

Due to these characteristics, microhistory can have an advantage when compared to other works of social history. These four qualities, nevertheless, do not characterize to an equal level works in microhistory, and each of them, when dominating, makes distinct types. Historians commit a fault if they concentrate their efforts on appealing to the general public. Perhaps this is the greatest fault out of the four possible faults of putting too much weight on one of the four advantages of microhistory, because to try to write strikingly is just a means to bring history to the readers, even if an extremely useful means.⁸ If the historian concentrates solely on writing to attract attention, his work can drift to the periphery of the field of possibilities. This can be balanced with a contextualization as full as possible, putting the stress on the ramifications of the single case. The story of Martin Guerre can serve as an example for this. The fourth characteristic of microhistory makes it possible for the microhistorian to step beyond the individual case and proceed towards the general, perhaps even with the intention to realize the old dream, writing total history.

The latest book of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Beggar and the Professor* (1997), however, gets distorted in another direction in certain chapters. This book, written on the basis of memoirs and diaries of members of the Platter family, follows the persons and events mentioned in the main source, and in the background of the life stories of the Platters the complete sixteenth century is drawn up, and in my view this makes it a much better book. From time to time, nevertheless, the text leaves the main source far behind, and the

focal point of the whole historical investigation gets blurred. When describing Felix Platter's route from Basle to Montpellier, the book turns into a sixteenth-century Baedeker. The picture presented will be wider and even more colourful, but the text loses in intensity and dramatic power. The historian should resist this temptation to exploit too much the opportunity offered by a microhistorical investigation to track down all the various lines of events which branch out from the focus of the event. The remedy could, perhaps, be to keep the experience central, and the historian should not say more, for example, about mid-sixteenth-century French towns than the sixteen-year old Felix Platter could know about them, thus using a different dramaturgy and presenting his sixteenth century to the reader.

Placing lived experience at the centre is probably the most important feature of the approach of the new social history. The success of memoirs and biographies is a testifier to this, the presentation of our century or past ages through the fate of a single person. Historians going too far into this direction can easily find themselves on the shaky ground of psychologizing (e.g. Bumiller 1993). The defence against this could be fastening the narrative with the anchors of reality.

A very detailed reconstruction of an event – robberies on 3 November 1680 in Old Hutton and on 15 April 1684 at Farleton (Westmorland) (Macfarlane 1981), or the last hours in the life of the great Hungarian poet, Sándor Petőfi on 31 July 1849 on the battlefield near Segesvár (Papp 1988–1989) – is the apotheosis of reality. As this on the one hand promotes appeal, it has on the other hand a disadvantageous effect on reflecting experience and showing ramifications. According to the widely used comparison, the sea is some way automatically in every drop of water. I should not think that this is true for the relationship of case studies and history, a very detailed microhistorical reconstruction does not reflect the whole of lived past. This calls for putting more weight on lived experience and on thorough contextualization. Sticking to reality, nevertheless, remains even more fundamental, because its abandonment would not mean any less than stepping over the dividing line between history and literature (e.g. Bisha 1998: 51–63).

The ideal work of microhistory may be equally supported by these four legs: it can appeal to its readers by being interesting, it transmits lived experience, it stands on both feet on the ground of reality, and with all the lines branching out from the event, person or community in focus, it points towards the general. It may. But even if the attempt is not crowned by success, it is worth trying. The best works of contemporary social history are, after all, fruits of such attempts.

Notes

- 1 For example, by Sigfried Kracauer and by Edward Muir, publishing a selection from *Quaderni Storici*, or (attributing the thought to Aby Warburg) by Carlo Ginzburg and by Martin Warnke writing a preface to a German edition of a Ginzburg book (Kracauer 1971: 105; Muir 1991: xxiv; Ginzburg 1990: 96; Warnke 1991: 9).
- 2 To mention only one of the most recent examples: James Sharp, having written a major book about witchcraft in England (Sharpe 1996), presents a single case as his latest volume (Sharpe 1999). The author had long advocated ‘a meaningful historical re-creation of the lives of the masses’, writing ‘the experience of the mass of the people’, and that this history from below ‘should be brought out of the ghetto [. . .] and used to criticize, redefine and strengthen the historical mainstream’ (Sharpe 1991: 25, 38). Anne Gunter’s case has certainly helped him in achieving this aim.
- 3 Barthes argues that in modernity, reality became worth mentioning even without having a function. In his example he recalled Flaubert mentioning a barometer in the detailed description of an interior. The *signifié* of the detail (in his example of ‘barometer’) is not the object itself, but ‘reality’ (Barthes 1982: 87–9).
- 4 He earlier condemned microhistorians that they want the reader experience rather than be convinced (Christiansen 1988: 16).
- 5 Giovanni Levi regards micro-analysis as ‘the starting-point for a broader move towards generalization’ (Levi 1991: 96).
- 6 Also Jacques Revel claims that the best works of microhistory describe the hero in a multiplicity of contexts (Revel 1995: 807).
- 7 Medick quotes Giovanni Levi who said in Basle at a debate that microhistory does not investigate small things but investigates in small. Medick himself really defines microhistory as small-scale investigation and not as the investigation of small things, but he rather puts the stress on reduction of the scale of investigation, which results in microscopic investigation (Medick 1994: 40, 44). David Warren Sabean also defies that the importance of the scale of investigation would determine the importance of his questions: ‘The local is interesting precisely because it offers a locus for observing relations’ (Sabean 1990: 10).
- 8 Lawrence Stone called the attention of historians more than twenty years ago to the fact that the narrative draws historians towards the sensational, they tend to be fascinated by stories of sex and violence (Stone 1987: 95).

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