# Rethinking Microhistory

## A Comment

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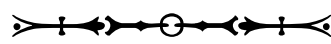
In "The Social Relations of Farming in the Early American Republic," Martin Bruegel promotes microhistory as an alternative to scholarship preoccupied with "big structures and large processes." The problem with macrohistory, according to Bruegel, is that its "bias towards flattening out the particularities of the past" (Bruegel is quoting Kenneth Arrow here) inevitably produces a backward-looking, deterministic reading of events. In his view, the best antidote to teleology is to focus attention "on the small scale and sometimes even on the singular event"—to study the choices that individual women and men made "on the ground." Although I share Bruegel's distaste for deterministic historical writing, I worry that his particular version of microhistory veers too far in the opposite direction toward antiquarianism.[1] The purpose of my comment is suggest how approaching the study of ordinary men and women from the perspective of what Paul David and Mark Thomas have called "historical economics" has the potential to avoid both of these pitfalls.[2]



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1. See Naomi R. Lamoreaux, Daniel M. G. Raff, and Peter Temin, "Beyond Whig History," *Enterprise and Society* 5 (Sept. 2004), 376–87.

2. Paul A. David and Mark Thomas, "Introduction: Thinking Historically about Challenging Economic Issues," in *The Economic Future in Historical Perspective*, ed. David and Thomas (Oxford, UK, 2003), 1–27.

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Bruegel declares in his conclusion that "a microhistorical look at the social relations necessary to run a farm has the virtue of complicating the analysis of economic transactions in the early republican countryside." Many historians would find such a statement unobjectionable; indeed, it is common for historians to assert that the goal of their study is to "complicate" the analysis of some situation or event. For economists, however, such assertions are puzzling, to say the least. They do not see why making an analysis more complicated should necessarily be considered a good thing.

Economists, of course, seek to simplify—to understand (model) the essential characteristics of economic relationships. Historians, in turn, tend to react adversely to economists' efforts at simplification—to label them "reductionist." But why? What might justify such a negative reaction? Although one possibility is that economists' simplifications leave out important details, this in itself cannot be a compelling objection. After all, as Hayden White pointed out long ago, one of the essential characteristics of any historical narrative is that it is selective. When historians compose narratives, just as when economists build models, they impose structure on the bits and pieces of extant evidence by deciding which details should be included and which should be excluded.[3]

A more meaningful objection is that economists' simplifications distort our understanding in important ways—that is, leave out evidence that does not fit their arguments. But critics of a model (or, for that matter, a narrative) must do more than simply show that evidence that has been left out does not fit. For their objections to have force, critics must also be able to demonstrate how putting the additional evidence back in leads to a very different understanding—an alternative model or narrative. In other words, "complicating" an analysis in order to underscore its limitations should be only the first step. It is important also to "resimplify"—to fit the evidence into a new interpretative framework.

To see why this additional step is necessary, consider Bruegel's attempt to correct what he considers to be the overly romantic view that many historians hold of rural life in early America. Although his evidence that there were serious tensions within farming households and communities is convincing, most historians will not see it as anything new. In-

3. See, for example, Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD, 1978), ch. 2.

deed, Michael Merrill concluded his famous article, "Cash is Good to Eat," with a brief discussion of "contradictions within the household mode of production," focusing especially on the inequality that characterized relations within rural households.[4] Merrell was aware that there was plenty of conflict within farming households and communities, but he thought it reasonable to abstract from such details for his larger purpose of contrasting the household mode of production with production for the market. Bruegel's act of complication cannot add to knowledge—cannot tell us anything new—until he shows that Merrill's simplification led him to misconstrue the differences between household and commodity production or at least caused him to miss essential features of the system of production he sought to describe.

How then should Bruegel, or for that matter any historian, approach the task of resimplifying—that is, of showing that a complication leads to a new narrative or model? The goal here should not be to turn historians into economists, but there is good reason to turn them into something close to what Paul David has called historical economists. The distinction can be explained by positing a deeper objection to the kind of simplifying in which economists typically engage: that it abstracts economic relationships from their historical context. In the famous growth model developed by Robert Solow, for example, even a major shock to the economy (say, the destruction of a major part of its capital stock in a war) is of only transitory importance; the economy will gradually move back on its equilibrium growth path, which is given by the rate of population increase, the savings rate, and the state of technological knowledge.[5] David, among others, has objected to this notion that shocks are only of transitory importance and has argued to the contrary that such disturbances can (and typically do) dramatically alter the economy's equilibrium path. David has argued, in other words, that contingency

4. Michael Merrill, "Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review* 3 (Fall 1976), 65.

5. This example comes from Timothy W. Guinnane, William A. Sundstrom, and Warren Whatley, "Editor's Introduction," in *History Matters: Essays on Economic Growth, Technology, and Demographic Change*, ed. Guinnane, Sundstrom, and Whatley (Stanford, CA, 2004), 3–4.

matters—that history matters. Many economic phenomena are, in his view, "path dependent" in that they are conditional on the particular sequence in which events unfolded. As a result, David argues, economics must become a historical social science and economists must pursue their task of simplification in a particular way. Rather than build models that abstract from history, they should construct theories that are attentive to the way things happened—to the details of history.[6]

If history matters, then, presumably historians are just as well placed as economists to understand how events that occur in historically specific contexts shape the evolution of the economy (or of society, more generally). But in order to play this role—in order to write historical economics or, if one prefers, economic history—they have to think systematically about how to construct what David and others have called "analytic narratives."[7] Logically, the first step that must be taken in any such analysis is to decide which changes should be taken as external to the narrative (that is, as exogenous or given) and which should be considered responses to these external developments (that is, endogenous). The words *exogenous* and *endogenous* are economic jargon, but they capture an essential feature of all narratives. There is always an inside and outside to a story; there is always something external to the dynamics of the story that sets its events in motion.

As a general rule, factors treated as exogenous changes should be big

6. For a clear statement of David's position, see David and Thomas, "Introduction." David first articulated his concept of path dependence in "Clio and the Economics of QWERTY" (*American Economic Review*, 76 [May 1985], 332–37). Using the example of the typewriter, he argued that manufacturers prematurely standardized their technology around "the wrong system," the inefficient QWERTY keyboard. Designed for technical reasons (to keep typewriter keys from jamming) that subsequent improvements quickly made irrelevant, the keyboard was nevertheless "locked in." Although David's argument gained much of its rhetorical power from the claim that the QWERTY keyboard was an inferior technology, there is no reason to insist that path-dependent processes lead to inefficient results—just that they shape in persistent ways the direction of technological development or of economic change more broadly. Indeed, path-dependent processes can have such profound effects on the structure of the economy that it is difficult even to imagine what the world would have looked like if events had been different.

7. See also Robert H. Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry K. Weingast, *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).

and important enough to constitute significant disturbances. With all due respect to chaos theory, the butterfly beating its wings over the Indian Ocean is not a good choice. Ideal candidates are what economists call "shocks." By that, economists mean something much broader than the financial panics or wars that the term conjures up in most people's minds. Shocks include those kinds of catastrophes, but the term also embraces other (more positively regarded) phenomena such as important technological innovations.

Shocks also can be caused by the actions of individuals who wield substantial power (the recent war in Iraq is a good example), but they are unlikely to be induced by the actions of people who are relatively powerless. If that is the case, however, what is the role for microhistory? What is the role for history written "on the ground"?

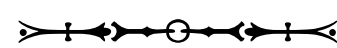
It has been fashionable over the last several decades to study history from the bottom up. Many historians engaged in this work have been content just to show that ordinary people in some group (typically defined in terms of race, class, gender, or ethnicity) had agency—that their lives were not completely determined for them, that they had space to make their own choices. Economists find it mystifying that anyone would regard such a conclusion as a contribution to knowledge. Their discipline is founded on the idea that all individuals make choices under constraints. This is not to say that they think the choices that ordinary people make are not worth studying. What matters is how one studies them. Although there may be circumstances when the actions of ordinary people might be analyzed as an external shock (for example, when people rise up collectively in revolt against oppression), for the most part the kinds of agency that historians working from the bottom up study should be considered endogenous responses. As such they are the raw material that historical economists/economic historians must use if they are to understand the path-dependent processes by which economic relationships change.

This point can be illustrated with an example from Bruegel's article. As Bruegel tells it, two different shocks, one in early nineteenth century and the other much later on, affected power relations within farming households. As a result of the first shock (conventionally termed "the market revolution"), and in particular the development of the putting-out system and of markets for products like butter and eggs, women obtained greater ability to earn money from their productive activities. Bruegel argues that women's increased earning power affected negotia-

tions within farm households, giving them the independence to make their own consumption decisions. So far the story is familiar.[8]

Bruegel goes on, however, to argue that subsequent industrial developments (for example, the substitution of factory production for the putting-out system) reversed this process by undermining the earning power of women in farming households. Bruegel uses evidence from a survey conducted for a 1913 Department of Agriculture report to argue that wives were "humiliated" by the control that their husbands now exercised over household income.

This additional twist is the kind of complication of a conventional interpretation that can generate an important new analytic narrative. Although it is not yet completely clear from Bruegel's article what the specific content of this narrative will be, its emerging shape suggests that it will counter any of the simple stories that scholars have offered about market involvement leading to greater personal freedom. The new narrative will still be a simplification, but of a very different kind. More importantly, the new narrative will almost certainly have a nondeterministic, path-dependent character. For example, it will force us to acknowledge that such historically specific factors as the way production is organized in a particular place at a particular time matters for how the economy evolves. In all likelihood, it will also force us to acknowledge that the order in which events occurred similarly matters. For example, it is possible that the women's lack of what Bruegel calls "financial agency" would not have had much consequence in the early twentieth century if women had never had it before—if they had not suffered a loss of power. It is also possible that this loss would not have been felt so sorely if women were not being bombarded by advertisements from manufacturers in industries that had sprung up in the previous period to satisfy women's consumption choices.



As Bruegel points out in his article, if one reads history backward—that is, from the perspective of what happened subsequently—one can often discern an underlying economic (or social) logic that seems to explain the direction of change. Such a reading often leads scholars to fall into

8. See, for example, Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

the trap of determinism. One can avoid this trap by reading history forward—by recovering the contingent nature of economic or social change. But here it is important to emphasize that the aim cannot simply be to show, in Bruegel's words, that "large-scale, macrohistorical developments take extraordinarily complex shapes 'on the ground.'" The aim cannot be to revel in the singular, in the diversity of human choices. In order to write history forward, one has to be willing to simplify as well as to complicate. But it is important to simplify in ways that illuminate the path-dependent processes by which economic relationships evolve.

It is also important to undertake this task systematically. Returning to Bruegel's narrative about family tensions, it is not enough to cite an impressionistic report. One has to go further and try to ascertain how pervasive such tensions actually were. Although it may not be possible to obtain much direct evidence, it is often possible to collect data on related developments. For example, if Bruegel is correct, one might expect to observe a drop in the number of bank accounts that have women's names on them, either solely or jointly with their husbands. One would also expect the structure of family budgets and patterns of household consumption to change. It is possible that some evidence on these matters might be obtained from the many surveys of household expenditures that state governments conducted during this period. There may also be records of mail-order houses such as Sears or Montgomery Ward that provide direct evidence on what farming households were buying and how their purchases changed over time. The general point is that is incumbent on anyone attempting to make such a case to go out and try to collect these kinds of data.

Unfortunately, at same time as historians have increasingly focused their attention on those on the bottom rungs of society, they have shunned the kinds of training that would help them collect and systematically analyze information about ordinary people. In particular, they have avoided training in quantitative methods. Of course, not all topics can be approached quantitatively. But quantification is an important part of the toolkit that any historian seeking to understand the behavior of such people should be prepared to use. Moreover, mastering quantitative techniques helps discipline scholars to ask the most important question of all. How can I test my argument? That is, how can I tell whether my understanding of the past is superior to alternative possibilities?

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