

## **Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social**

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It is not accidental that microhistory played a key role in the critical reflections begun by Annales historians in the 1980s. The term "microhistory" refers to the programmatic pronouncements and even more the practices of a small group of Italian historians who began publishing in the 1970s the best known of whom are Carlo Ginzburg, Edoardo Grendi, Giovanni Levi, Carlo Poni, and their students). The work of these historians can be distinguished on two fronts : first, they practiced social history in a country where social history was far less dominant than in France ; second, as outsiders with respect to the leading French approaches to the subject, they were able to draw on work being done in many other countries, especially England and the United States. Their program (which was in any case quite loosely coordinated : there is more than one concept of microhistory) was not so much a model as a guidepost : some Annales historians found it helpful to reflect on the implicit assumptions of their approaches as well as on settled habits and reflexes. Microhistory was thus taken less as an alternative strategy than as an occasion for critical reflection on historical methods. This is the perspective Jacques Revel develops in this essay.

One of the dominant versions of social history is that which took shape in France around the Annales and then spread beyond French borders. Its formulation has changed over the past sixty years, yet it offers certain relatively constant features that can be traced back to the critical program that the Durkheimian sociologist François Simiand proposed to historians a quarter of a century before the Annales were born (1). Simiand reminded historians of the rules of sociological method, which he believed would become the rules governing a unified social science of which the various disciplines would thenceforth exhibit particular modalities. In the future, Simiand argued, historians would have to turn their attention from the unique and accidental (that is, from individuals, events, and singular cases) to that which alone could be the object of true scientific study, namely, the repetitive and its variations, the observable regularities from which laws could be inferred. This initial choice, which the founders of the Annales and their successors largely made their own, sheds light on the fundamental characteristics of French - style social history :

the emphasis on the study of the largest possible aggregates ; the priority granted to measurement in the analysis of social phenomena ; the choice of a time frame long enough to make large scale transformations visible (and, as a corollary, the need to situate analyses within different time frames). Certain consequences of these initial requirements have left a lasting mark on the resulting historical methods. The preference accorded to series and numbers made it necessary to invent suitable sources (or to come up with ad hoc methods for processing traditional sources) ; it also made it necessary to define simple or simplified indices to abstract a limited number of properties or distinctive features from archival documents, in order to follow their variations over time : prices and incomes were used at first, then measures of wealth and occupational distributions ; then later, births, marriages, deaths, signatures, titles of books and editorial genres, pious acts, and so on. Not only did it then become possible to study the evolution of each of these indices over time, but, more important, one could, as Simiand had first done with wages and as Ernest Labrousse did in *L'Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIIIe siècle* (1933), use the data to construct relatively complex models.

From Simiand and the Durkheimians, first Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre and then, in the following generation, Ernest Labrousse and Fernand Braudel also took a sort of scientific voluntarism : the only objects that one can study scientifically are those constructed according to explicit procedures in light of an initial hypothesis which is then subjected to empirical validation. One has the impression that these elementary rules of method were sometimes neglected later on. Procedures certainly became more complicated, but owing probably to the dynamics research itself, their experimental status was often forgotten. Many the objects that historians constructed were hypothetical in nature, still there was a growing tendency to treat them as if they were real thin Instances of this can be found quite early in the history of the *Annales* (2). Criticisms were sometimes leveled at various procedures in price history such as the choice of spatial units of observation and socioprofessional categories, but these criticisms were not enough to halt the general tendency. Furthermore, these approaches figured in a macrohistorical perspective that was never made explicit or subjected to testing. More precisely, the scale of observation was not treated as an experimental variable, because it was at least tacitly assumed that the social realm waq continuous or homogeneous in such a way that one could without difficulty piece together various results : parish, region, city, and occupation were thus treated as neutral terms for the collection of data, accepted they were given.

This model of social history entered a period of crisis in the late 1970s, and early 1980s, that is, by a strange irony, just at the moment when it seemed to be at the height of its triumph, when its results were taken as authoritative well beyond the boundaries of the profession and the "territory of the historian" seemed capable of indefinite enlargement. Clearly, the sense of a crisis was slow to make itself felt, and it is by means certain that a majority of historians even today would agree that we are in the midst of one. Perhaps, then, we should say more modestly that it was in the early 1980s that criticism of the dominant model, how ever scattershot, became more insistent. Historians began to reconsider their practice for reasons of several different kinds. Computers made possible to record, store, and process much greater volumes of data than in the past, yet many historians felt that the questions they were asking had not kept pace with this technological progress, and that their vast quantitative projects had begun to come up against the law of diminishing returns. Meanwhile, a growing specialisation within the profession tended to fragment a field of research that had seemed definitively open and unified. These developments were felt all the more strongly because in the meantime, the great paradigms that had unified the disciplines the social sciences (or at any rate had given them a common outlook came under harsh attack, leading also to doubt about some forms of interdisciplinary exchange. In the same period, society itself was overcome by doubts in the face of crises it could not understand - or, in many cases, even describe - and this naturally contributed to the belief that the hope of achieving a global understanding of the social must at least temporarily be set aside. The foregoing remarks only hint at various aspects of an analysis that remains to be carried out in detail. The developments in question began in different places but converged toward a single end, obviously interacting with one another along the way. Taken together, and no doubt influenced by other factors as well, they helped to undermine the certainties of a macrosocial approach that had previously gone largely unquestioned. The interest in microhistory was a symptom of this crisis of confidence as well as a source of ideas for formulating objections and making them concrete

\* \*A change in the scale of analysis is an essential element in the definition of microhistory. It is important to understand the significance of this change and the stakes involved. Like anthropologists, historians are in the habit of working on circumscribed units of relatively small scale (3). It is misleading to refer to these units as "terrains" (although

historians have for twenty years been fascinated by ethnology). More prosaically, a monograph, which is the primary vehicle for formulating the results historical research, is associated with the conditions and rules under which professional work in history is done : the insistence on documentary consistency ; the familiarity that is supposed to guarantee mastery of the object of analysis ; and a representation of the real that often seems to require that problems be associated with "concrete," tangible, visible units. The monograph is generally defined in terms of practice : it is a text in which one presents data and constructs proofs (and in which one also well advised to prove oneself). In itself, however, it is assumed to be inert. Hundreds of monographs, all based on the same general set of questions, have laid the foundations of social history. The problem implicit in the proliferation of monographs was not one of the scale of observation but, rather, of the representativity of each sample relative to whole into which it was supposed to fit as one piece of a puzzle. There were no fundamental doubts about the possibility of relating the results of any particular monograph to a mean or mode or typology or whatever was required.

The microhistorical approach is profoundly different as to purpose and method. It is based on the principle that the choice of a particular scale of observation produces certain effects of understanding useful in junction with strategies of understanding. Changing the focal length lens not only magnifies (or reduces) the size of the object under observation but also modifies its shape and composition. Or, to use a different metaphor, changing the scale of a map is a matter not simply of depicting a constant reality in a larger or smaller format but of changing content of the representation (that is, the choice of what is representable). Note, incidentally, that in this sense the "micro" dimension enjoys no particular privilege. It is the principle of variation that is important, not the choice of any particular scale.

Over the past few years, however, the microhistorical view has be particularly successful. The historiographical circumstances briefly summarised above help to explain why. The recourse to microanalysis is be understood first of all as a move away from the accepted model social history, which from the beginning has been explicitly or (increasingly) implicitly inscribed in a macro framework. This move made possible to shed certain old habits and to take a critical look at the instruments and methods of sociohistorical analysis. Furthermore, it has provided a practical historiographical avenue

for a new focus on the problem of scale in historical analysis (following the lead of some anthropologists) (4).

Let us turn now to the effects of understanding associated with (or at any rate expected from) the shift to a microhistorical scale. Take, to begin with, one of the rare programmatic texts that helped define the microhistorical project. In an article published in 1977, Edoardo Grendi observed that because the prevailing model of social history organised data in terms of categories developed to permit maximal aggregation (such as wealth, occupation, and so on), it failed to grasp things associated with social behavior and experience and with the formation of groups identities that inhibited the integration of diverse types of data. Grendi contrasted this approach with that of (mostly British and American) work in anthropology, which was notable he argued "not so much its methodology as for its emphasis on a holistic approach to behaviour" (5). This claim may seem overly general, but the characteristic concern of microhistorians is worth noting - namely, a concern to develop a research strategy based not primarily on the measurement of abstract properties but, rather, on integrating and interrelating as many of those properties as possible. Confirmation of this concern came the following year in a rather provocative text by Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, proposed using "names" - proper names, that is, the most individual and least repeatable of indicators - as markers for constructing a new type of social history focused on individuals in their relations with other individuals (6). Here, the individual is not conceptualised as antithetical to the social : the hope was to achieve a new angle of vision by following thread of a particular destiny - that of a man or group of men - and with it the multiplicity of spaces and times, the complex tangle of relations in which that destiny became involved. Here again, the two authors preoccupied with "the complexity of social relations as reconstructed by anthropologists working in the field, [which] contrasts with the unilateral character of the archival data with which historians work.... Yet if the terrain of research is sufficiently limited, documentary series can be superimposed in time as well as space, making it possible to locate the same individual in a variety of social contexts". Basically, this is the old dream of a total history, but this time reconstructed from the bottom up. For Ginzburg and Poni, this approach should make it possible to "reconstruct lived experience". This formulation is loose and ultimately vague, and one might prefer to describe it as a program for analysing the conditions of social experience reconstituted in all their complexity. The key is not to abstract from but initially to enrich reality by including the widest possible

range of social experience. This approach is illustrated by Giovanni Levi in his book *L'Eredità immateriale*. His method is intensive : to collect "all the recorded biographical events of all the inhabitants of the village of Santena" over a fifty - year period in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The goal is to go beyond obvious general trends to reveal the social strategies developed by various ors (individuals, families, and groups) in light of their respective positions and resources. Of course, "in the long run, all these personal and family strategies seem to run together to produce a relative equilibrium. Yet the participation of each of them in the general history, in the formation and modification of the underlying structures of social reality, can : be evaluated solely on the basis of tangible results : in the course of life of each there arise, in a cyclical fashion, problems, doubts, and choices - a politics of everyday life - at the center of which lies a strategic utilization of social rules". Maurizio Gribaudi takes a similar approach to a geographically close but historically and historiographically remote site - the formation of the working class in Turin at the turn of the twentieth century (7). Where others had insisted essentially on a common set of experiences (urban immigration, work, social struggle, political consciousness, and so on) ostensibly underlying the unity, identity, and consciousness of the working class, Gribaudi sought to trace individual itineraries, which reveal the variety of working - class experience, the many contexts in which it occurs, and the internal and external contradictions that this creates. He reconstructs the geographical and professional moves, the demographic behavior, and the relational strategies that accompany the transition from the rural farm to the urban factory. Like many other historians, Gribaudi began with the idea of a homogeneous, or at least behaviorally homogenizing working - class culture. In the course of his work (and in particular in collecting oral histories of family background), he discovered a diversity of ways of becoming a worker and living under working - class conditions :

"The problem was to find out how each family in the sample negotiated the journey and its own social identity ; what mechanisms allowed mobility for some while enforcing stagnation for others ; and how individual outlooks and strategies changed, often drastically. In other words, putting the problem from the worker's point of view, this meant investigating the various building blocks out of which workers constructed their diverse experiences and physiognomies, thereby shedding light on the dynamics responsible for pulling things together or tearing them apart" (8).

Clearly, the microhistorical approach set out to enrich social analysis by introducing new, more complex, and more flexible variables. There are, however, limits to such methodological individualism, since we are always trying to discover the rules governing the formation and functioning of a social entity or, rather, a collective experience

"Classical" social history was mainly conceived as a history of social entities - a community (village, parish, city, district, and so on), an occupational group, an order, a class. One could, of course, discuss the boundaries of these entities and even more their coherence and sociohistoric significance, but their fundamental importance was not open to question (9). As a result, when one looks through the enormous mass of results accumulated over the past thirty or forty years, one has a certain sense of *déjà vu* and stagnant categories. From one work to the next, the characters are the same though the casts may vary. Someday someone will have to delve into the reasons, no doubt complicated, for this tendency toward descriptive sociography. It was, in any case, strong enough to impede in France the influence of a book like E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (first published in 1963 but translated into French only in 1988) ; Thompson, of course, refused to accept any readymade (or ostensibly well-established) definition of the working class and instead emphasized its "making." (10). After a number of isolated attempts (11), it was only later that French historians gradually became convinced that an analysis in terms of distributions was no longer possible. There were two main reasons for this, and we would do well to distinguish between them even though they partially overlap. The first has to do with the old problem of the nature of the classificatory criteria on which historical taxonomies are based. The second concerns the recent emphasis on the role of social interaction.

In both cases, the choice of a microhistorical perspective is of crucial importance. With respect to social analytical categories, it is surely at the local level that the disparity between general (or exogenous) and endogenous categories is most pronounced. This problem, though long recognized, has become more acute in recent years, owing to the influence of anthropology, especially American cultural anthropology, which has focused primarily on local analyses. This is not the place to go in detail about the kinds of solutions that have been proposed. The results of this necessary (and not yet complete) change of viewpoint are ambiguous. It has, of course, made it possible to cast a critical eye on categories and decompositions that used to be taken for granted. On the other hand, it

tends to encourage cultural relativism, which is one of the tendencies of "Geertzism" (so named after anthropologist Clifford Geertz) in social history.

As for the second direction of research, moving toward a reformulation of sociohistorical analysis in terms of process suggests a way out of this dilemma. The idea is that the historian should not simply borrow the language of the actors he is studying but also use that language to point the way toward broader and deeper inquiry aimed at the construction of multiple, malleable social identities working through a complex network of relationships (of competition, solidarity, alliance, and so on). The complexity of this type of approach makes it necessary to limit the field of observation. Microhistorians are not content, however, to observe this *de facto* constraint ; they transform it into an epistemological principle when they attempt to use individual behaviors to reconstruct the modalities of social aggregation (or disaggregation). Simona Cerutti's recent work on guilds and corporations in seventeenth - and eighteenth century Turin can serve here as an example (12). Surely, no historiography is more spontaneously organicist than that of guilds and guild associations : these are obviously functional communities, and they are assumed to have exerted such powerfully integrative effects that they became almost natural constituents of early modern urban society. The boldness of Cerutti's approach is to set these certitudes aside in order to show how professional identities and their institutional expressions are not given in advance but, rather, are elaborated and redefined by dint of constant effort involving individual and familial strategies. Instead of the consensual and, on the whole, stable world of guilds that we see in traditional histories, here everything is conflict, negotiation, and provisional transaction. At the same time, personal and familial strategies are not purely instrumental : they are socialized in the sense that they are inextricably associated with representations of urban relational space, of the resources it offers and the constraints it imposes, for it is these representations that shape the outlooks and choices of the social actors. Cerutti thus denaturalizes (or at any rate "debanalizes") the mechanisms of aggregation and association by emphasizing the relations that make them possible and identifying the mediations between "individual rationality and collective rationality."

The shift in focus that has taken place here is probably more obvious to historians than to anthropologists, because the methodological histories of the two disciplines have not always coincided (13). In my view, a number of important redefinitions are implicit in the move

1. A redefinition of the presuppositions of sociohistorical analysis, whose major features I have discussed above. In place of systems of classification based on explicit (general or local) criteria, microanalysis focuses on the behaviors that define and reshape social identities. This does not mean that microhistorians ignore the "objective" properties of the population under study ; rather, they treat those properties as differentiating resources whose importance and significance are to be judged in light of the social uses to which they are put.

2. A redefinition of the notion of social strategy. Historians, unlike anthropologists and sociologists, work with the *fait accompli*, with "what actually happened," which by definition is not repeatable. Rarely do alternatives appear in the sources themselves, especially in view of the uncertainties that the social actors of the past had to contend with. Historians are therefore in the habit of invoking the notion of strategy in an ambiguous sense : often it serves to bolster a general functionalist hypothesis (which normally remains implicit), while sometimes it serve more prosaically, to characterize the behavior of those individual or collective actors who succeeded (and who are generally those whom we know best). In this respect, the resolutely antifunctionalist attitude of the microhistorians is highly significant. By taking multiple individual destinies into account, they seek to reconstitute a space of possibilities in light of knowledge of the resources available to each individual and group in a given configuration. Giovanni Levi has probably gone farther than anyone else in this direction by reintroducing the notions of failure, uncertainty, and limited rationality into his study of peasant family strategies with respect to the market for land in the seventeenth century (14).

3. A redefinition of the notion of context. This notion has often been used in a facile and lazy way in the social sciences and, in particular, history. Rhetorically, the context is often evoked at the beginning of monograph, where it produces a "reality effect" around the object of research. Argumentatively, the context sums up the general conditions within which a particular reality has its place, and in practice this often means nothing more than a simple juxtaposition of two distinct levels of observation. Interpretively, the notion of context is used, less frequently, as a device for drawing out the general factors with which one can account for particular situations. Much of the historiographical work produced over the past twenty years, including but not limited to work in microhistory, has registered dissatisfaction with these various uses of the notion by attempting to relate text to context in a variety of ways. What is distinctive about the microhistorical approach is the refusal to

take any of the uses just mentioned for granted - in other words, a refusal to accept that a unified, homogeneous context exists within which and in relation to which social actors make their choices. This refusal can be understood in two complementary way : a reminder of the multiplicity of the social experiences and representations, in part contradictory and in any case ambiguous, in terms of which human beings construct the world and their actions (this is the main thrust of Levi's critique of Geertz) (15) ; but also, in analysis, as an invitation to reverse the historian's usual approach, which is to situate and interpret his text in relation to a global context. By contrast, what microhistorians propose is to reconstruct the multiple contexts necessary to identify each and make sense of observed behavior. This of course brings us back to the problem of the scale of observation.

4. A redefinition of the scale of observation. This seems to me the most drastic revision. Instead of a hierarchy of scales of observation, historians instinctively prefer a hierarchy of historical "prizes." To put it facetiously, at the national lever one does national history ; at the local lever one does local history. (One is not necessarily more important than the other, particularly from the standpoint of social history.) At the most basic level, the history of a social entity apparently dissolves into a myriad of minuscule events that are hard to organize in any meaningful way. The traditional conception of the monograph seeks to achieve meaningful organization by providing local verification of general hypotheses and results. The multiple contextualization of the microhistorians is based on very different premises. It is assumed, to begin with, that each historical actor participates to one degree or another in various processes (hence within various contexts) of different dimensions and at different levels from the most local to the most global - thus, there is no discontinuity, much less an opposition, between local history and global history. The experience of an individual, a group, or an area makes it possible to apprehend some particular modulation of global history. It is both particular and unique, because what the microhistorical viewpoint offers is not an attenuated or partial or mutilated version of macrosocial realities but a different version.

(Translated by Arthur Goldhammer)

## NOTES

1. François Simiand, "Méthode historique et science sociale," *Revue de Synthèse historique* (1903) ; on the importance of the Durkheimian influence on the origin of the

- Annales, see Jacques Revel, "Histoire et sciences sociales : Les paradigmes des Annales", *Annales ESC* 34 (1979), pp. 1360-76.
2. See Jean-Yves Grenier and Bernard Lepetit, "L'expérience historique : à propos de C. E. Labrousse", *Annales ESC* 44 (1989), pp. 1337 - 60.
3. It would be interesting to follow the parallel formulation of problems of scale in history and anthropology, noting any time differences between the two : see Christian Bromberger, "Du grand au petit : Variations des échelles et des objets d'analyse dans l'histoire récente de l'ethnologie de la France," in I. Chiva and U. Jeggle, eds., *Ethnologies en miroir* (Paris : Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme 1987), pp. 67-94.
4. In addition to the general influence of British and American anthropology, microhistorians are indebted to the work of Fredrik Barth, *Scale and Social Organization* (Oslo University of Bergen Press, 1978), and *Process and Form in Social Life* (London, 1980).
- 5 Edoardo Grendi, "Micro-analisi e storia sociale", *Quaderni storici*, 35, (1977), pp. 506-20 ; see also Grendi's introduction to the special issue "Famiglia e comunità" of *Quaderni storici*, 33, (1976), pp. 881-91.
6. Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "Il Nome et il come : Mercato storiografico e scambio disuguale," *Quaderni storici* 40 (1979), pp. 181-90 (partial French translation : "Le Nom et la manière", *Le Débat*, 17, 1981, pp. 133 - 36).
7. Maurizio Gribaudi, *Itinéraires ouvriers : Espaces et groupes sociaux à Turin au début du XXe siècle* (Paris : EHESS, 1987).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25. Once again, the references cited by the author are often to British and American works in anthropology, especially Fredrick Barth and other interactionists.
9. Recall the debate that Ernest Labrousse initiated in the 1950 in connection with a proposal to undertake a comparative history of the various European bourgeois and the now - outdated debate of the 1960 between Labrousse and Roland Mousnier over "orders versus classes".
10. Note, however, that Thompson's work was conceived within a macrosocial perspective.
11. Let me mention, for example, Michelle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en grève* (Paris : Mouton, 1974) ; Jean-Claude Perrot, *Genèse d'une ville moderne : Caen au XVIIIe siècle*. (Paris : Mouton, 1975), 2 vols. ; and, from sociology, Luc Boltanski, *Les Cadres* (Paris : Minuit, 1982).
12. Simona Cerutti, *La Ville et les métiers : Naissance d'un langage corporatif* (Turin, 17e-

18e siècle) (Paris : Editions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1990), pp. 7-23.

13. Marc Abélès's work on local politics in contemporary France (*Jours tranquilles en 89* [Paris : O. Jacob, 1989]) uses most of the themes and some of the formulas proposed at the same time by microhistorians (with whom Abélès had no contact).

14. Giovanni Levi, *L'Eredità immateriale : Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del seicento* (Turin, 1985).

15. Levi, "On Micro - History", p. 202 ; see also "I Pericoli del Geertzismo," *Quaderni storici* (1985), pp. 269-77.

