

2011

Forty Years of Microhistoriography

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Recommended Citation

Rion, Nicholas L., "Forty Years of Microhistoriography" (2011). *Research Papers*. Paper 283.
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FORTY YEARS OF MICROHISTORIOGRAPHY

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

M .A in History

Department of History
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2011

APPROVAL

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A Research Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Masters of Art

in the field of History

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Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 15. 2011

Introduction

The “genre” or “sub-field” of Microhistory was pioneered by a group of Italian scholars in the 1970’s who had recently gained access to a treasure trove of official Catholic Church documents. This archive primarily associated with inquisitional persecutions carried out by the church against suspected “heretics” throughout the Early Modern European era, offered these scholars countless new insights to the period as well as called into question many long held historical ideas. Experimental in nature this “new” microhistorical approach enabled scholars an entirely new methodology to use in their investigations. Although highly controversial, the genre quickly gained adherents across Europe and over the years its influence has impacted scholars around the world.

This essay will look at Microhistories evolution from its early roots in the 1970’s until the present day. In the following pages I offer not only my own description of what microhistory is, but also what acclaimed microhistorians have to say about definitions. I too, like many microhistorian theorists, have attempted to categorize microhistores. The typology I offer is designed to enable the reader to see how microhistoriography has grown and developed in this forty year period and also to offer examples of new innovative scholarship within each category. I also briefly explore the early roots and influences on microhistory practice and scholars.

This essay also seeks to demonstrate how microhistorical methodology can be used by scholars in their own investigations and offers explanations as to why so many young students are gravitating toward the practice. In conclusion, I show how microhistory has informed me in my own work and challenged me with so many new ways of considering historical practice.

Towards a Definition

Microhistorians Variouslly Define Their Own Work

The ever-inquisitive Italian historian and polymath Carlo Ginzburg says that he first heard of microhistory in 1977 or 1978 from Giovanni Levi. “I adopted this previously unheard of word without asking what it meant,” Ginzburg recalls and “I contented myself with the reference to a reduced scale suggested by the prefix micro.” He remembers that in those early conversations with fellow historian Levi they talked about microhistory “as if it were a label attached to an empty container waiting to be filled.” Little did he realize then that over four decades later these early discussions would blossom into a new period in historical scholarship?

As one of the earliest practitioners and theorists of microhistory, Giovanni Levi explains, in an early manifesto attempting to clarify the new discipline, “microhistory as a practice is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and on intensive study of the documentary material”.¹ Ultimately, for Levi and Ginzburg the major challenge for them and the emerging new field was “how to address a more complex social structure without losing sight of the individual’s social space and hence, of people and their situation in life.”² Levi remembers that in those early days it became abundantly clear that even the “minutest detail/action of say somebody buying a loaf of bread actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world’s grain market.”³ Such analysis in the late 1970’s was revolutionary to say the least and a serious departure from so much of the Social History being practiced at the time by a generation of historians obsessed with quantification and the pursuit of formulating strict “laws of social behavior”. On the other hand for a generation of younger

¹ Levi, Giovanni, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 99.

² Ibid, 99-103.

³ Ibid, 104.

students, tiring of the confines placed on their work and grappling with the meteoric changes sweeping the world and the practice of history, this new theoretical and methodological approach was warmly welcomed.⁴

One of these early converts, who had already on her own begun to experiment with bringing agency to the forgotten of history and seriously to question the course of historiography at the hands of the quantifiers, was American historian Natalie Davis—author of the ground breaking and perhaps best known book in the field *The Return of Martin Guerre*.⁵ For Davis one of the major issues is striving for quality over quantification. In a 1981 interview conducted by the Radical Historian's Organization Davis described her practice in the emerging genre of microhistory "as a dialogue and sometimes debate with the past." Davis stresses that the major challenge she faces, as do all historians, in creating this dialogue is to "re-create these people without molding them in my own image."⁶ This understanding of the historian's intrinsic position/relationship to the histories they pen is one of the methodological premises that all microhistorians recognize. For Davis, like Ginzburg and Levi, the acknowledgement of this relationship demands not only a clear explanation of the historian's methodological approach, but also constant vigilance to avoid bringing one's own pre-conceived notions, bias, prejudices, or agenda to bear on their subjects. Over the course of the past two semesters' we have often referred to these personal issues as "traces", outlined in considerable detail by the Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci. Also in understanding this relationship between writer/historian and the "real people" they bring agency to, microhistorians I believe have much more respect for

⁴ For a discussion of these changes see: Eley, Geoff., *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. 2005 pgs. 115-181. Novick, Peter. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Practice*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1988. pgs. 281-361 and Chapter IV. Also see Iggers, Georg. *Historiography in the 20th Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge*. Hanover, University of Hanover Press. 1997. pgs. 97-133.

⁵ Davis, Natalie Zemon, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 1983.

⁶ Diefendorf, Barbara and Carla Hesse, eds. *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press. 1993. pgs 1-10.

them, as people who once lived, made plans, had dreams, etc., than other contemporary historians.

Because of the work of Davis, and the Italian school represented by Ginsburg, Levi and their colleagues Carlo Poni, Simona Gerutti, Guido Ruggiero, Edoardo Grendi, Marco Ferrari, and others, microhistory became synonymous with their collective scholarship that focused primarily on Early Modern Europe.⁷ Microhistory also became intricately associated with their use of heretofore seldom-considered inquisitional trial records and other Church documents. This treasure trove of archives, which has still barely been researched, offered plenty of information for them to ply their experimental methodologies aimed at bringing agency to the peasants or “subordinate classes” as well as emphasis to the roles of gender and minorities. Although, as we shall see, this focus has changed over the years with an ever increasing scholarship of microhistory in America, the Caribbean, South America, and Africa—one of the major developments in the genre-- the bulk of microhistorical work is still directed at the early modern period in Italy, France, Spain, and to some extent Germany and England.

Ultimately, most practitioners of microhistory embrace several common characteristics in their various works and these methodological similarities are still reflected today. First and foremost is an analysis that endeavors to reduce the scale of observation to the microscopic. One historian has drawn the parallel between a biologist’s microscope and this historical methodology.⁸ What this means in practice is that the historian instead of dismissing these small incidents, stories, or anomalies in the source material as trivial, to give them the same historical consideration one would to issues appearing to have greater or larger significance. For the microhistorian these small or tiny and obscure organisms through careful study and analysis

⁷ For a listing of various works by these authors see the Bibliography.

⁸ Muir, Edward and Guido Ruggiero. *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe. Selections from Quaderni Storici*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1993. See the introduction.

reveal much about relationships between state and peasant, elite culture and peasant culture, and a way to reinterpret larger factors impacting society.

This reverence for the small clue as being just as important as other historical observations of broader/larger phenomenon is foundational bedrock in microhistoriography. Most microhistorians argue, and I concur, that through this type of consideration the historian can express the complexities of reality in these historic cultures and societies in such a manner as to offer major new insights and breakthroughs. Often times this is accomplished by utilizing a fragmentary body of primary source material which in the past would have been totally ignored by historians. As a consequence this new approach has made hundreds of new discoveries and told the stories of countless “folk” from the past who would other wise have in the words of E.P. Thompson been condemned to the “condescension of posterity.”⁹

Early Historiographic Influences on Microhistory

In his 1997 book *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*,¹⁰ Georg Iggers recounts numerous early developments in microhistory and offers a “genealogy”, so to speak, of earlier scholarly works and theoretical schools of thought that influenced this burgeoning new movement. Iggers cites the French *Annales* School, originally organized by French historians in the early twentieth century with a major “new emphasis” on social scientific methodological uses in approaching historical scholarship. *Annales* scholars were more interested in social and cultural ramifications and analyses of history, than traditional scholarship, which focused primarily on political, diplomatic, nationalist, and “Great Man” historical themes. The *Annales*

⁹Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1964. pg. 12

¹⁰ Iggers, *Historiography*, see chapters 8 and 9.

were also generally hostile to Marxist historiography consumed by class analysis and structural paradigms of Base and Superstructure.

One life long *Annales* scholar Fernand Braudel, wrote shortly before his death, “On the surface, the history of events works itself out in the short term: it is a sort of microhistory.” Carlo Ginzburg’s professor, Alberto Tenenti, studied at the *Annales* research institute, as did renowned microhistorian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie who contributed frequently to the *Annales* journal. On the other hand, some in the Italian Microhistory School like Benedetto Croce reject collaboration between history and the social sciences, particularly *Annales* influences.¹¹ Many contemporary scholars, who follow these historiographical changes and trends, including Iggers and Eley, have noted the curious pattern of historiographical movement. According to them microhistory as one of the last inheritors of numerous *Annales* traditions, is the one genre whose existence most completely marks its demise. I will posit that the *Annales* focus on cultural and social events within a given society, can be seen in microhistorian’s work with the exception that the latter’s focus is much more defined to a very specific event and period.

Also according to Iggers and others who have looked at linkages between microhistory practice and earlier historical developments the classic work of E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the British Working Class*, offered scholars across multiple disciplines a new framework for studying social and cultural relationships within a given society and historic periodization. Although Iggers asserts this work had an impact on microhistory, as evidenced by Natalie Davis’ frequent discussion of and reference to the work, many in the Italian school, including Ginzburg, have a differing view. Ginzburg, in a 1986 interview with the *Radical History Review*, claimed he is not a radical in the sense of E.P. Thompson even though one can read class and politics into

¹¹ Ibid. For a discussion of the *Annales* influences on microhistory see Chapters 8 & 9.

everything.¹² Having read Thompson's work myself I can see how his analysis of the poor in their long journey toward empowerment and the development of a class identity could be used as a template by microhistorians, if not in scope, at least as a possible methodological tool. However, I cannot draw any clear cut examples of Thompson's influences in the works I have read except to make a broad generalization that microhistorians are concerned with the poor, peasant, working/laboring folk, as is Thompson, albeit through a much smaller and specific lens of observation.

Microhistorians have also liberally borrowed practices and methodologies from various other academic disciplines including the branch of anthropology known as ethnology. Modern ethnologist's use of both comparative analyses of origins, distributions, technologies, religion, language, and social structures of ethnic, racial, or other cultural divisions within humanity seem a perfect fit for use by microhistorians. I could argue that this ethnological use by microhistorians is evident to some degree in most every work I have considered. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's development and use of his "Thick Description" methodology whereby meticulously studying and analyzing human behavior one is able to contextualize that behavior and show its broader meanings within a culture, society, family unit, or kinship structure is also evident in many microhistories.¹³ Scholars in several other disciplines including the Social Sciences and the New Historicism have also adopted this practice. We see practitioners delving into analysis of behavior as a deliberate means of communication and often times that behavior is deeply coded in cultural actions of a given group or individual. Such usage permeates throughout many of the works I have encountered.

¹² Diefendorf, Barbara and Carla Hesse, *Culture and Identity*. See introduction for Davis's references to E.P. Thompson.

¹³ For a discussion of Geertz's "Thick Description" see Iggers, *Historiography*, Chapter 9. See also Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York, Basic Books. 1973.

One of the last major influences on microhistory is what both Iggers and Stone refer to as microhistorian's rediscovering the narrative literary form and its roots in classical historicism. This classicist historicism, represented by a central notion of the intrinsic connection of social context with time, space, place, and local conditions and the repudiation of fundamental generalizable immutable laws governing the world of social and cultural phenomenon and human behavior is also readily evident in microhistoriography. This version of historicism associated with the New Historicism, adopted by microhistorians, holds the view that there are only raw texts and artifacts that exist in the present and the various methodologies scholars use to decode them. We see numerous microhistories that analyze a single poem, a lone diary, a painting or a portrait, a forgotten inquisitional trial record, or some other fragment of primary source material or artifact all created by their authors/artists as an expression or reaction to the power structures that exist in a given society. Utilizing this form of literary analysis enables the practitioner to extrapolate layer after layer of hidden meanings and identify broader cultural and social connections.¹⁴

An Attempt to Categorize Historiography in Microhistory: My "Own" Typology

There are four specific "categories" or types of historiography within the genre of microhistory I have identified—although they are not "rigid" typologies. I offer them here as a way to simplify my analysis.

Academic Works

Many microhistories are theoretical in nature or analyses of various methodologies both widely utilized and new emerging experimental applications. In fact, many are not even

¹⁴ Iggers, *Historiography*. Chapter 9. See also Stone, Lawrence. "The Revival of Narrative". *Past and Present*. 1985. 11-79.

“microhistories”, but discussions about microhistory. They are often intricate and complex discussions of philosophical issues within the field. Many others discuss in finite detail methodological difficulties in working with inquisitional archives and other official Church resources from the Early Modern European era. I have collectively called this group “Academic” microhistory.

This area of investigation is dominated by Italian microhistorian’s scholarship, including both Ginzburg and Levi, and a cadre of their fellow colleagues. By and large this scholarship is not for the novice, but advanced students and scholars within the genre. I am not the only one to recognize this proclivity by Italian scholars to delve more into the theoretical and philosophical historiographic issues. Edward Muir, editor of many Italian microhistory collections, has noted that the Italian University tradition has always been deeply rooted in both philosophy and theory, as well as historically bound to certain political ideologies. However, microhistorians in Italy try to avoid political ideology at all junctures and often write about this as a major problem facing their scholarship, particularly younger historians who are often relegated to years of service for an “ideologue” professor with Italian political connections. According to Muir and Ginzburg many young Italian historians interested in microhistory cannot work in the field until they are nearing forty years of age and have completed their tutelage under often times “despotic” masters.

The Italian journal *Quaderni Storici* started in 1966 as a venue for new studies and writings in Social, Economic, Religious, and Gender history. Since the mid-1970’s Microhistory and works aimed at ethnic and religious minorities have also been added. Today it is recognized as the premier publication of microhistorical scholarship both Italian and International. It is often the instrument Ginzburg, Levi, and others use to disseminate new trends

and developments in the genre and many of the writings are of the “Academic” nature I have briefly described. For an example of these types of works see Edward Muir’s collection of *Quaderni Storici* articles in his *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*.¹⁵

I would like to give the reader some examples of topics and debates within this category that are not only challenging for introductory students of microhistory, but also representative of the advanced nature of the historiography they consider. For instance, in a series of *Quaderni* articles under the title “Microstorie” Ginzburg, Levi, Edoardo Grendi, and the British historian John Brewer debated for over a year about what microhistory is, including topics as esoteric as whether Italian microhistories were influenced by Italian neorealist movies. In his 1979 work *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Ginzburg acknowledges through a personal inventory, reminiscent of a Gramscian model, the impact the leftist movements of the 60’s and 70’s had on his “critical attitude towards the alleged neutrality of scientific knowledge.” He claims that through this self analysis he came to have “no sympathy either for the rejection of knowledge as a pure appendage of power, or for the more circumscribed rejection of positivism.”¹⁶

In yet another near cathartic self-analytical essay entitled “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist” Ginzburg acknowledges for all of his readers the process he went through “to come to realize how deeply {my} own cognitive approach had been shaped by the inquisitors’.” He goes even deeper in his analysis tracing this “disturbing contiguity” to his own reflections of being persecuted as a Jew during the Second World War and having lost his father to a Nazi death camp. In the same article he asserts that the main themes of *The Cheese and the Worms*,

¹⁵ Muir, Edward. *Lost Peoples of Europe*.

¹⁶ Ginzburg, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1980.

the challenge to authority, and the persecution of minorities—were developed to a large extent because of his own personal experience with persecution.¹⁷

Other Italian microhistorians have written in *Quaderni* of their own self-analytical odysseys in an effort to become better historians. This type of psychological inventory taking in relationship to one's own theoretical and philosophical positions is uniquely Italian. Although many of these discussions have taken me a while to evaluate and come to appreciate, I have to say that I can think of no other “school” of thought, that I have been exposed to, that goes to such extraordinary lengths at self awareness and the dangers one's own experiences might bring to their work. I strongly believe it is a model or methodological approach all historians should contemplate regardless of their area of study.

So, within this “Academic” category you will also find these types of personal reflections by microhistorians critically self examining their own works, ideas, methodologies, their “traces” I discussed in the previous chapter, and often detailed analyses on where they found their sources, how they used them, etc.—laid plain for their readers to see. I quite frankly find this amazing and incredibly instructive, especially for a novice interested in Microhistory.

Traditional or “Istituto”

This category I have called Traditional or the Latin equivalent “Istituto” is the one I have struggled the hardest with to arrive at a reasonable nomenclature that adequately defines it. I have also considered synonyms like conventional, acknowledged, classic, or established. One problem with my term “Traditional” is that microhistory is barely fifty years old, hardly enough time for something to be traditional. It has also proven problematic to label because it is not only

¹⁷ Ibid. pgs. 156-64. The article “Inquisitor as Antropologist” appears in Ginzburg's work.

the largest category in the genre, but also the one that most closely incorporates the widely defined microhistorical methodologies discussed earlier.

The primary reason I have kept the category name might sound foolish or be to simplistic. I reason that the microhistory genre is like a new “family” within the larger kin group of the historical discipline and that families can establish traditions, that are not shared by second cousins or great aunt’s, in less than two generations. For better or worse this is my definition until something more appropriate is offer.

All of the works in this category are true to the covenants set out earlier by Ginzburg, Davis, and Levi. They all pay particular attention to the small clue, the needle in the haystack--so to speak—the fragmentary source document, a single “question”, or those odd, overlooked, forgotten characters from the past. Here we see E.P. Thompson’s influence the most perhaps, in that these microhistorians are not only engaging in a serious dialogue with the past, but they all seek to rescue at some level “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver” etc. etc. from, what I have referred to, “as the junk bin of history.”¹⁸

One of the things I consider to be a major innovation or result of microhistory is what its impact has been on literally scores of young scholars. From the fertile soil toiled by Ginzburg, Davis, and so many others, over three decades of new scholarship has grown to fruition and continues to blossom year after year. Highly representative of this phenomenon are many of Natalie Davis’ former students who are now full-fledged microhistorians practicing their craft today as professionals. The same can be said of Ginzburg whose influence amongst young Italian scholars is often noted. I would also suggest that Ginzburg might well be the catalyst for so much new microhistorical work in strictly American applications since the 1990’s and particularly the

¹⁸ Thompson, E.P. *Makings of the English working class*. pg. 12

past ten-years. Ginzburg had a Chair at the University of California in Los Angeles from 1988-2006. This would be an interesting “genealogy” to undertake at a later date.

Examples of Davis’ influence and of “Traditional” microhistories can be seen in a collection of essays published by her former students in her honor.¹⁹ In this collection, edited by Barbara Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, any one familiar with Davis’ *Return of Martin Guerre* will undoubtedly see her invisible hand guiding these former protégés. Not only do all of these articles utilize the microhistorical methodologies I have discussed at some length, they also use Davis’ narrative style.

There are many examples of this, but I will offer only two here. In Barbara Diefendorf’s “The Huguenot Psalter and the Faith of French Protestants in the Sixteenth Century,” the author, true to microhistorical methodology asks a primary question and looks in various 16th century Huguenot communities throughout France for the answer. The question Diefendorf asks is how Huguenot’s used the vernacular translation by Clement Marete and Theodore Beza of the Psalms during their persecutions? Was the usage “universal” as reported by others? Were the practices the same—i.e. the same interpretation, rituals, doctrines, etc.? What was the significance of the Psalms?

What she discovered from meticulously looking at the available source archive was how varied and widely different these scriptures were interpreted by different Huguenot groups in different geographic regions. From her analysis she was able to show how these differences manifested themselves in the language the Huguenots used to express their fundamental beliefs. She documents how these various interpretations armed them with both a new militancy and understanding of persecution as a “trial by God.” These various understandings helped them weather the storms of persecutions, particularly the enormity of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day

¹⁹ Diefendorf, Barbara and Carla Hesse, eds. *Culture and Identity*.

massacre.²⁰ Without the use of microhistory in carefully studying the known archive and unearthing “fragmentary” scraps of clues from all over the country, the prevailing myth that the Psalms were universally understood the same would still prevail.

In Alison Lingo’s “Print’s Role in the Politics of Women’s Health Care in Early Modern Europe,” the author, using a similar fragmented source archive written in the vernacular, looks at the impact of the introduction of printing on women’s health care in 16th and 17th century France. She identified a troubling “central paradox” at the heart of the matter. While on the one hand the new technology allowed broader dissemination of information to people, it also made it possible for a new type of control over public thought. She shows how for a short period, because of women’s direct involvement in spreading and often writing medical information, women’s health care benefited substantially. This unprecedented access to knowledge about women’s own bodies measurably improved their situation for a brief moment in history.

Unfortunately, this was not to last. Lingo documents a rising storm amongst male medical practitioners over this new challenge to their authority. In a determined effort these “medical” men asserted their hegemony over the print industry, eventually excluding women from any further involvement. Asserting that life saving obstetrical practices was to be the domain of the “male prerogative”, they affectively replaced “traditional empirical medicine of female midwives” with not only draconian theories and potions, but also more startling a new passion to perform life threatening dangerous surgical procedures.²¹

Lingo shows how these actions stymied women’s health care advancements for decades and she was also able to demonstrate that women’s health care concerns then are not that far

²⁰ Diefendorf, Barbara, “The Hueguenot Psalter and the Faith of French Protestants in the Sixteenth Century.” *Culture and Identity*. Pgs. 41-64.

²¹ Ibid. pgs. 203-222.

removed from women's concerns today. Again, without microhistorical methodologies and a sharp eye for the hidden fragmentary clue this reality would never have been discovered.

These two examples show how microhistory has developed from initially looking primarily at inquisitional trials of heretics throughout the early modern European period, to much broader applications and questions today. Its experimental nature and liberating theoretical premises open the field up to virtually any type of application. I could go on and on with other examples of these "Traditional" types of microhistories, but I do not wish to write book reviews. I used these two simply as examples of this particular typology and their connection to microhistories basic tenants and as examples of new innovative uses of the genre.

Macro/Microhistories or *La Grande Petite Microhistoire*

In my analysis there was one "type" of microhistory that clearly and definitively was a departure from so many of the others, especially in scope of investigation. These are the ones that I have categorized in my topology as Macro/Microhistories or *La Grande Petite Microhistoire*. By far the leading practitioner of this far more encompassing historiographical structure, in its incorporation of prosopography, genealogy, and various elements of ethnology, is the award winning author/historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. His impressive list of credits—*Montaillou; The Promised Land of Error, The Peasants of Languedoc, Carnival in Romans*, and *Jasmin's Witch*—all push the "traditional" microhistorical approach to new limits.²²

For example, in *Montaillou* Ladurie does far more than consider a single individual or analyze a specific event in "microscopic" detail. Although true to microhistorical tenants, highly representative of the "Traditional" category, in this case he has expanded his "microscopic lens"

²² Ladurie, Emmanuel Le Roy. *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*. New York. G. Braziller. 1976. Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans*, Translated by Sian Reynolds and Ben Reynolds. New York. G. Braziller. 1979. Ladurie, *Jasmin's Witch*. Translated by Brian Pearce. New York. G. Braziller. 1987.

by tracking the interpersonal relationships and family ties of, not one individual or family, but over 80 people for over a thirty-year period. In documenting the impact that inquisitional forces had on the community he has literally brought this small village back to life and considered virtually everything you could imagine—from behavior, varying traditions in the town amongst sheppards, farmers, and the few shop keepers, religion, power, demography, genealogy, children, sexuality, social *mentalities*, architecture, art, education and the list goes on.

Ladurie's use of prosopography, from the materials I have considered, appears to be his innovation to the genre of microhistory. Today many others in the field are using this methodological tool in their works and investigations. Prosopography as a research tool enables the historian to look for common characteristics amongst historical groups where individual biographies are largely untraceable. Through the collective study of a groups lives, within a certain historic periodization, the researcher can discover not only inner personal connections between the group and how these relationships developed, but also how this group interacted with the institutions of their time—i.e. legal, political, social, economic, and intellectual.²³

In one of the articles we considered this semester Laura Putnam's "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World" she tracks a group of African Caribbean's over several decades including their cross continental travels to Europe. She uses prosopography as an aide to microhistory to develop greater understandings of this group's role in the resistance movement against British colonial control of the Caribbean and ultimately their part in bringing about independence.²⁴

²³ For a discussion of prosopography and its applications in history see: Keats-Rohan, Katherine. *Prosopography approaches and Applications: A Handbook*. Oxford. Prodopographica et Genealogica. 2007.

²⁴ Putnam, Laura. "To Study the Fragments Whole". *The Journal of Social History*. Vol.39. pgs. 781-802. 2006.

Ladurie does much the same thing in both *Carnival* and *The Peasants of Languedoc*. In putting the entire “village” under the microscope, he has truly lived up to Clifford Geertz’s statement, “that we don’t study villages, we study in villages.”²⁵

Another example of this “Macro/Microhistory” category is the remarkable work by Patricia Cohen *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in 19th Century New York*. It is one of the few American microhistories I read and like many others that look at incidents of crime and subsequent “official” trials, Cohen here applies microhistorical methodologies to this once infamous 1836 murder. Utilizing a source archive as bountiful as inquisitional records often are, in this case—trial transcripts, newspaper reports, coroner and police records, personal letters and diaries—she is able to unearth a mountain of information.²⁶

Through her careful analysis Cohen not only chronicles the minutest details of the crime and trial, but also the incidents larger impact on early 19th century American society. She discovers that this widely reported affair became the birth of American investigative journalism and how its affect on popular opinion or consciousness across the country helped spark new laws and reforms for the protection of women, regardless of the fact that the woman was a “recognized” prostitute. She is able to recreate life in New York and around the expanding United States, in much the same way Ladurie does with *Montaillou*. Her investigations take her even farther in identifying upper class elite men’s participation in not only frequenting such establishments, but also their role in financing and protecting the “business”. She explores class, power, and gender relationships, not to mention how the incident created a whole new genre of the five-cent murder mystery novel.

²⁵ Quoted in Introduction to Muir, *Microhistory*.

²⁶ Cohen, Patricia. *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in 19th Century New York*. New York, New York. Albert Knopf, 1998.

The only other source I have analyzed, thus far, that I would consider fitting this categorization is Ginzburg's *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*.²⁷ Like La Durie's works, Ginzburg here too stretches the microhistoriographical "envelope" to new scale. Utilizing microhistorical methodologies in looking for clues to witches "supposed" activities in the seventeenth century Ginzburg's investigation takes him back over three centuries and even more. In his lengthy analysis he finds striking similarities of earlier persecutions of Jews, lepers, and Muslims to those perpetrated against suspected "witches". This work is by far one of his most ambitious projects and represents a departure from everything else of his I have considered.

I consider this work a microhistory because Ginzburg starts off with a primary question, and utilizing the same techniques he has in earlier works, searched for answers and clues everywhere. Unearthing those small fragmented sources and references lead him on an investigation that took him far and wide throughout Europe and as the study developed grew to incorporate several centuries. This is representative of what I mean by Macro/Microhistory--using the fundamental methodological tenants of microhistory in a study that becomes voluminous.

"Microhistory as Short Story or Novel"

This brings us finally to the category that has experienced the greatest "popular" appeal in the genre. These works I have categorized as "microhistory as short story or novel." Not to be simplistic but these works are "fun to read." I believe they capture the true essence of what microhistory is by putting the reader directly into the story and engaging one's own imagination and sensibilities. The literary stylings are no doubt more readable, at least for young students and the uninitiated, and at the same time challenging to the readers intellect. Most of these read like real life murder thrillers, mysteries, true-life crime stories, or courtroom dramas. Many times the

²⁷ Ginzburg, Carlo, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath*. New York. Random House. 1991.

microhistorian simply presents all of the known evidence and the reader is left to determine or decide the outcome. Almost all the works in this category revolve around the actions of one or two central characters or a close-knit group.

For me Gene Bruckner's *Giovanni and Lusanna* exemplifies all of the characteristics I have mentioned above. This short novella about love gone bad in mid-15th century Florence was written from trial records of the couple's courtroom feud over a promise of marriage. After I finished the book I was shocked by how many considerations of 15th century Florentine culture imparted to my psyche. As if unknowingly, I immediately began to reflect on questions of power, class, law, sexuality, virility, cultural mores, the role of community "gossip", marriage, family structure and sibling rivalry, ceremony, feasting, work, economy, fashion or dress, love, hate, desire, lust, greed and ultimately death.²⁸

Another example is Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. In this short work about the life, tribulations, and trial of 17th century nun Benedetta Carlini written from Counter-Reformation legal proceedings against her, Brown explores many of the same issues as Bruckner has in his work. One of the first recorded episodes of lesbianism in Western History, Brown meticulously retraces the life and deeds of Carlini. From a modest middle class family her father pledged her to the Convent of the Mother of God in Pescia at the age of nine. At the age of twenty-three she started having visitations from God and Jesus. Church officials initially eagerly embraced these experiences and as a result she rose to the position of abbess. Then things would change. Brown tells the story of her fall from grace first at the hands of church officials who questioned her visions and visitations by God, and then by a fellow nun Bartolomea Crivella who accused Carlini of indecent sexual acts against her.

²⁸ Bruckner, Gene. *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in renaissance Florence*. Berkeley. University of California Press. 1986.

Through her microhistorical examination Brown illustrates convent life in Renaissance Italy, gender relationships within the church hierarchy, sexuality, power struggles between the local clergy, bishopric, and Rome, and ultimately church law and punishment. Like so many other works in this category the reader is in the end left to decide for them self whether Carlini was a victim or a fraud.²⁹

These two examples should give you a sense of why I call them “Microhistory as novel or short story.” There are countless other examples of this typology that all follow the same general format while not losing sight of the microhistorical method. There is little wonder why these types of works have generated so much popular readership and often-inspired plays and films. They are also a continuing example of the innovative and experimental nature of microhistory.

Summary

This “structural” paradigm or topology is far from foolproof and there are often times works that appear that could be categorized in one or more locations. However, this structure and these few examples give some idea of how the genre of microhistory has expanded over the past forty years and how its experimental nature has been used by scholars to blaze new historiographic territory.

²⁹ Brown, Judith. *Immodest Acts: The Life and death of a Lesbian Nun in renaissance Italy*. New York. Oxford University Press. 1986.

SEARCHING FOR THE NEXT MENNOCHIO

A young student of microhistory, Julie Dyess Ellis, in her unpublished thesis has called the ongoing investigations into microhistorical sources “the scent of human flesh.”³⁰ After following the evolution of this genre from its early roots through the major influences of Davis and Ginzburg I believe her observation is appropriate. In essence microhistorians, like the modern day criminologist or CSI and the Sherlock Holmes of Arthur Conan Doyle, are in pursuit of a “blood” trail that will hopefully lead them one day to either a body or a grave. And, like the detective of popular literature they will write the story, analyze all of the clues, and name the suspects.³¹

From its humble beginnings in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s the discipline of microhistory has evolved into a major academic field of scholarship with literally hundreds of practitioners worldwide. Most every college history program at least acknowledges the genre in graduate seminars, colloquiums, or classes. Many survey books on American historical traditions/historiography for undergrad students also offer a brief synopsis of this ever-emerging “new” field.³²

From its early roots, deeply entrenched in the voluminous archival sources available throughout Europe, especially in Italy, microhistory has now offered new insight and applications to scholarship of the “poor” and subordinate classes across the world as well as a new sensitivity and awareness of gender and minority history. Every month there are new postings of books, manuscripts, papers, projects, seminars, conferences, etc. on the website *Microhistory.org* operated by Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson, chair of the Center for Microhistorical

³⁰ Ellis, Julie Dyess, “Microhistory: The Scent of Human Flesh.”, Texas Tech. Unpublished thesis. 1996.

³¹ In the introduction to Muir’s *Microhistory*, he discusses these similarities between Sherlock Holmes and the investigative skills of scholars like Ginzburg and Levi.

³² For example Iggers, *Historiography*, has detailed account of Microhistory. See Chapter 9, “From Macro to Microhistory: The History of Everyday Life”.

Research at the Reykjavik Academy in Iceland.³³ According to Magnusson the field of microhistory and its methodological approach has taken many Nordic countries, from Norway and Denmark to the Balkans and the former Soviet Union by storm.

As Ginzburg discovered in his etymological research on microhistory the first use of the term was by the American polymath George R. Stewart in his 1959 work *Pickett's Charge; A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*³⁴. Perhaps then it is fitting that it has taken nearly a half century for American historians to finally be reclaiming their early “roots” in microhistory as evidenced by the explosion of the new genre in specific American applications. Literally scores of new titles have appeared in the United States in the last ten years.³⁵

As I move forward in the remaining days of my life I know that what I have learned from these scholars and this phenomenon called microhistory will forever change my approach and attitude towards history. As a young student here at SIU thirty years ago this type of scholarly endeavor would have been completely dismissed by the positivists and quantifiers at the helm. Having these chains removed from my mind has literally opened up scores of new possibilities for me in my own work. Even the paper I am currently working on for my Illinois history class about John F. Kennedy's Oct. 3, 1960 campaign swing through southern Illinois can be looked at through the gaze of this genre.

From carefully looking at activities that happened that day I have been able to identify local religious prejudice against Catholics, deep fears of Communism, anxieties over a failing economy, internal power struggles within the local Democratic Party, Republican's vehement

³³ www.Microhistory.org, see also a site ran by the Italian Microhistory School featuring Ginzburg, Ruggiero, Levi, Grendi, and many others at [www.Microhistory Network. Org](http://www.MicrohistoryNetwork.Org).

³⁴ Stewart, George R. *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*. Cambridge. Riverside Press. 1959. For an indepth look at the etymology of microhistory see Ginzburg, Carlo “Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It.” *Critical Papers*, 1993. 10-35.

³⁵ For a short list of American microhistories see the special Bibliography entitled “American Microhistory”.

opposition to Kennedy, and paint a “realistic” picture of the community on that day—I know what movies were playing at the Varsity Theatre, a new restaurant named McDonalds had just opened up that week, chicken was 19. Cents a pound, and former SIU student turned activist/comedian Dick Gregory was going to be on national television that night (other than Sammy Davis Junior, the only other African American to achieve this.)³⁶ For this I must thank Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Davis, and all of the others. Also, as I remember the “genealogy” that led me to this discovery I cannot forget a debt of gratitude to Dr. Vince Lacey, Dr. Holly Hurlburt and Dr. Rachel Stocking. And, I am always indebted to Dr. Michael C. Batinski who began chipping away at the “old guard” in this department all those years ago and deepened my love and appreciation of history. Thanks to all!

³⁶ Kennedy resources, *The Egyptian*, and the *Southern Illinoisan*, Oct. 1-7, 1963.

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Forty Years of Microhistoriography

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