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Arch of Ianus sketch by Giovanni di Velabro (1700's); Statue of Ianus found in Regöly, Hungary

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The capacities of microhistory

Looking at the contents of this conference volume, it seems to me that almost all the papers share the same outlook – all but this one. Every participant of the conference held in November 2014 was concerned with the writing of history as a social and cultural practice, the uses of history in past times. Every author of this volume looks back and devotes one's attention to ways historians wrote history in the past, but not usually in very remote times. This paper, however, focusses on the future: how history will be written – or at least, how it might be written in the years to come. Its approach is, therefore, not historiographical, but methodological. And, finally, it is taking a clear stand for microhistory, that contrasts with the the balanced and neutral stance of other papers to be presented here. This essay stands, therefore, out of the programme: not simply partisan and unbalanced but also exaggerated and therefore suspect.

Although all this might make this paper stand out here, in this volume, it is certainly still not completely out of place. Since the subject of the conference, the study of the ways historians wrote history in past, has always had a theoretical and methodological side, beyond the purely historiographical one. The questions concerning who wrote certain historical works, when and why, have always been accompanied by other questions concerning the general ways of how the relationship of the actual present and the past is seen, how knowledge can be generated about the past and what methods were considered legitimate in doing so. It might be also be argued that although that the study of the writing history is necessarily facing the past, we are talking and writing in the present, and no present action makes any sense if we have no intentions about the future. So, the outlook of this paper might not be fundamentally different from all the others – it just emphasizes something that might go unnoticed elsewhere. And finally, it is the conviction of historiography, a *sine qua non* of our profession, that historians are never neutral and impartial, for they have simply no chance to be like that – and therefore we ourselves, the historians of the other historians' work, we cannot be that, either. So, the confessed partial stance of this chapter for microhistory is just a frank statement of something that we all share. That makes it possible that a few relevant ideas may be touched upon by it, that concern the heart of the matter that was the subject of the conference held at the University of Debrecen in November 2014.

This paper intends to map the possibilities of microhistory in the writing of history. Having defined microhistory and placed it halfway between social and cultural history, a special attention will be given to the relationship between microhistory on the one hand and present fashionable currents of history on the other. Finally, four different forms, say four stages will be suggested in which the approach of microhistory can be efficiently used in producing historical knowledge.

Microhistory and experimental or global histories

In my understanding, microhistory, originally an Italian school of writing history (under the name of *microstoria*), originating in the 1970s and becoming world-wide known through the scholarship of Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, finally getting fashionable also among English-speaking historians at the end of the 20th century, can be defined through three characteristics: first of all the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well defined smaller object (be it a single event, a local community or an individual), then, the conviction of the microhistorians that this investigation can lead them to finding answers to 'great historical questions', and, finally, that microhistory always regards those who lived in the past as actors, people who make decisions and thus form their lives in an active fashion.

As far as I can see, microhistory stands with one of its legs in the tradition of structure-oriented social history and with the other in the group of the approaches that can be classified as cultural history, that want to explore experiences of past actors as well as put a stress on their own interpretations of what happened to them.¹ This position of microhistory can be advantageous, since histories that concentrate exclusively on historical understanding (*Verstehen*), those who want to find only meaning, cannot get closer to the past than the authors of their sources.² It is, therefore, advisable to apply another approach as well, give the *a posteriori* explanations of the social history, using all the insights and methodological knowledge of the present-day social historian. (The best is to try to give several explanations at once to stress the arbitrary character of these.) I am convinced that one of the strongest arguments for microhistory is that it offers a possibility to blend the approaches of social and cultural histories. Its position between social and cultural history provides

¹ Ute, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte*, 456.

² Ute, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte*, 406–407.

microhistory with chances better than usual to arriving at valid new historical understandings.

I would like to argue that several works of the so called experimental history (transgressing the borderline of history and fiction) demonstrate the compatibility of the microhistorical approach and the experimentation with historical narratives, which is often labelled a post-modernist way of writing history.

John Demos e. g. built a fictitious monologue in his *The unredeemed captive*, while Simon Schama deliberately juxtaposed fictitious and real elements in the texts of his famous *Dead certainties*. Robin Bisha embarked on writing a pseudo-autobiography in an article, based on extensive research, and Russell McCormach invented the figure of a German theoretical physicist merging real characters. Several attempts at merging history with literature are published in a volume edited by Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone. One of the books of the latter stands out because of the distinctly literary character of its narrative.³

The microhistorical approach seems to fit perfectly with these crossover attempts, and such attempts do not disqualify a narrative being history, if we agree with Reinhart Koselleck according to whom sources never lead the hand of the historian, rather tie it, sources must not be contradicted, they will never prescribe what the historian should actually write.⁴

It is more surprising, that microhistorical approach can similarly co-exist with global history, which seems to be *par excellence* macro-oriented. Not only Ginzburg tried to understand colonization through the life of one person, Jean-Pierre Purry, but others argue, too, that world history should be presented through the eyes of a single individual – e. g. Dale Tomich.⁵ Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook's microhistory of a sixteenth-century Spanish *conquistador* and his case of bigamy has trans-Atlantic connections at the core of the book.⁶ Randy J. Sparks's microhistory of two princes of a West-African kingdom (sold as slaves but redeemed from slavery) offers amazing insights into trans-Atlantic and cross-cultural connections in the 18th century.⁷

³ Demos, *The unredeemed captive* (1996). Schama, *Dead certainties* (1992); Bisha, "Reconstructing the voice of a noblewoman of the time of Peter the Great" In: Menshikova, *An experiment in (pseudo) autobiographical writing*, 51–63.; McCormach, *Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist* (1982).; Munslow–Rosenstone (eds.) *Experiments in Rethinking History* (2004).; Rosenstone: *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (1988).

⁴ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 111.

⁵ Ginzburg, *Latitude, slaves and the bible*, 665–683.; Tomich, *The order of historical time*, XIII, 4, 1958. 2008.

⁶ Cook–Cook, *Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance* (1991).

⁷ Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar* (2004).

It seems that on the one hand microhistory can deepen historical understanding, while on the other it is compatible with the outlook of global history, since microhistory demands exploring all the implications of the case under the historian's microscope – including global ones, too.

The uses of microhistory

Having established that a microhistorical approach is compatible with some of the fashionable ways of writing history, the question arises: why would it be worthwhile to take the trouble and fumble with microhistory at all? My answer to this questions is based on the conviction that microhistory has as yet unexplored capacities for tomorrow's history.

To the founders of *microstoria*, the value of microhistory rested mainly in its subversive capacity. Even as late as in 2010, Carlo Ginzburg argued that the case may indicate the weak points of dominant epistemological paradigms.⁸ But if microhistory aspires to make general conclusions, to find answers to 'great historical questions' – which is clearly the case –, we cannot be satisfied with this. So let me suggest two more ways how microhistory can be used in the production of historical knowledge: as a junior partner and in a cooperation with macrohistory. Finally, it is also possible to combine the previously mentioned three fashions: subversion, junior partnership and cooperation.

To start with, I would like to evoke four books that share an important feature: all have a main argument, a backbone formed by macrohistorical considerations, often even underpinned by statistical evidence. But all of these also include dozens of most interesting short cases which bring their narratives quite close to those of microhistorical works (usually concentrating on one case, but exploring it in more detail and depth). In Joanne M. Ferraro's book about marital conflicts and separation in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice, in Gabriella Erdélyi's book about violent conflicts in late medieval Hungary that ended up in a Papal court of justice in Rome, in Adam Zamoyski's book about the retreat of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* from Moscow in 1812, and finally in Orlando Figes' book about the fate of Russian families under Stalin⁹ – in each of the ventures represented by these books microhistory is only a junior partner, nevertheless an important one. Here, microhistorical approach has a vital contribution in making a better history out of more traditional, fundamentally

⁸ Ginzburg, "Postface: Réflexions sur une hypothèse" in: *ibid.: Mythes emblèmes traces. Morphologie et histoire*. 361–362.

⁹ Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (2001).; Erdélyi, *Szökött szerzetesek*. (2011).; Zamoyski, *1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow* (2004).; Figes, *The Whisperers*. (2007).

macro-oriented historical works; the details of the several cases presented distinguish Ferraro's Erdélyi's, Zamoyski's and Figes's books from mainstream history. They convey lived experience to the readers, bring past people very close to them, and keep scholarly analysis on the level of the individuals, where history is lived. This can therefore be regarded as one of the possible uses of microhistory. It has been built upon partnership, rather than rivalry between macro- and microhistories. I would say that in these ventures microhistory occupies the position of a junior partner. Let us, then, make one more step into this direction: from partnership to cooperation.

An alternation of macro- and microhistory was suggested by Siegfried Kracauer as early as in 1969. He thinks that historians should concentrate on microhistory and occasionally give macrohistorical overviews.¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis claims that great historians have long moved from micro- to macro-perspective and back.¹¹ But this cooperation might get a theoretically well-founded organized form. It is evident that if microhistory wants to find the answer to a great historical question in the deep-going analysis of a single case, it is of crucial importance how this case is selected – unless we think that 'the sea is present in every single drop of water' (which is the underlying assumption behind Erich Auerbach's fantastic *Mimesis*).¹²

Instead, I would like to argue that historians, at certain (but not an early) stage of their careers might feel that they can not only identify the problems that they have long faced in a single case, but also give the answers to these problems in applying a microhistorical approach and exploring the single case in depth. So, the first stage is acquiring a profound knowledge of the period, its source material and historiography, and the second phase is what the American pragmatist philosopher, Charles S. Peirce calls 'abduction'. (It was an American historian, Edward Muir who linked microhistory to 'abduction'.) According to Peirce, when we are looking for a theory, we take our starting point in facts. We do not make random guesses, but use our intuition. And what can happen, is what he calls 'abduction': a sudden regrouping of hitherto unconscious information into a new form. This is the only possible way to form new hypotheses.¹³ I think that microhistory is born by way of 'abduction', based on the self-similarity of history.¹⁴ The results of the microhistorical investigations, and this is stage number three, can finally change the outlook of macrohistory, might question

¹⁰ Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before The Last*, 104–138.

¹¹ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How historians map the past*, 81–84.

¹² Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 509.

¹³ Muir, *Introduction: "Observing trifles"* in: Muir–Ruggiero (eds.): *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, viii, xvi–ix; cf. Sebeok–Umiker-Sebeok, *You know my method*. 1980.

¹⁴ For the argument about self-similarity see: Magnusson – Sziártó, *What is Microhistory?* 63–64.

old orthodoxies. Here we have reached the point so dear to Ginzburg or the generation of 1968 in general. There is a final step to be made: to combine all the so far mentioned uses of microhistory – subversion, junior partnership and cooperation with macrohistory – in a comprehensive approach.

It was almost fifteen years ago, when a friend and colleague of mine stood up at the end of a lecture of mine, giving an overview of microhistory, saying: 'All this is very well, but how to write the microhistory of Hungary?' And he repeated this three years ago at another conference. By now, I think I have an answer, at least in the form of a project of writing the microhistory of 18th-century Hungary that combines in its comprehensive approach the possible uses of microhistory.

The recipe goes like this: get prepared by studying your period for at least a quarter of century. Then mix macrohistorical arguments and microhistorical case studies so that the latter could add the historical actors' experiences and representations to the learned explanations of the social historian. Choose your microhistorical cases so that they could represent the main historical problems of the age, say one case for each chapter, and explore these so deep that you could suggest answers for the great historical questions of the age. And if you are lucky, you might end up with a dish that refutes earlier established historical knowledge and opens up new vistas for research.

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