

MICROHISTORY AND MACROHISTORY: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE ANALYSIS OF HISTORY

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Macrohistory and microhistory are both subfields of the “new history” that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century and as such, they purport to focus upon the real people in history. Fernand Braudel, for instance, in *The Structures of Everyday Life*, gives his purpose as “introducing everyday life [...] into the domain of history.”¹ However, historians of each school take radically different approaches to their study. A macrohistory takes a long view of history, looking at multiple societies and nations over the course of centuries to reach broad-ranging conclusions about the march of history. Using vast amounts of data – some verified but much of it estimated – the macrohistorian makes conjectures based on averages. This approach might appear to have the most interest on a general level, but often loses sight of local and individual differences.

When writing microhistory, the author concentrates upon a single individual or community and through study and analysis, attempts to reach understanding of wider issues at play. Very tightly limited both spatially and temporally, a microhistory might appear of rather limited importance to a reader whose interests lie beyond that particular point in time and space but in fact, the approach does have certain advantages. The author of such a history is usually an expert in their field, knowing not just the generalities but also the *minutiae* of their study. This allows a level of depth not usually found in more broadly based works. In addition, they may avoid the natural biases that come in macrohistories from the area of specialization of the author. Braudel for instance, concentrates his study upon Europe and the Far East, practically ignoring Africa, the Middle East, Oceania and the Americas, ostensibly for lack of statistical evidence.²

Similarly, Kenneth Pomeranz, a specialist in Chinese history focuses his work, *The Great Divergence*, on China and Western Europe, as the regions best served by evidence.

Finding relevant evidence is a constant struggle for all kinds of histories, including both micro and macro. An early and major problem for the author of a microhistory is selecting a subject suitable for study. Amid the vast numbers of documents, the historian must find an individual or community about whom he can come to conclusions that reflect upon wider questions. In some cases, it is a matter of sheer luck. Carlo Ginzburg admits to finding the documents relating to Menocchio, the subject of his work, *The Cheese and the Worms*, while searching the archives for other material entirely.³ Yet, authors of such works can often work with very little material and still reach interesting conclusions. Most of Ginzburg’s conclusions come from the transcripts of the two trials of Menocchio. In addition, he used literary and religious sources as the basis and reinforcement of his thesis. Likewise, Jonathan Spence used only three main sources in his work, *The Death of Woman Wang*, including one literary source.⁴ In both cases, these would seem to be a very limited number of resources. However, because of the very limited geographical and temporal scope of microhistories, the authors need fewer sources than for a macrohistory.

Still facing an incomplete mass of evidence, the authors of microhistory have different options. Ginzburg takes the rigorous approach of clearly admitting where the evidence is scarce and noting when he has made suppositions. What evidence he does have, he deconstructs

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life, Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 29

² *Ibid.*, 34

³ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xi.

⁴ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979) xi–xiii.

methodically to reach his conclusions. Spence takes a somewhat different tack in *Woman Wang*. He is less conscientious about identifying the gaps in his data and less systematic about his analysis. Rather, he seems more intent upon using the sources as the basis of a narrative with which to illuminate Chinese peasant life than to propose any single thesis.

While the microhistories use a variety of sources, including trial transcripts, journals and literary pieces, writers of macrohistories seem to use more narrow criteria for their sources. Here, the emphasis is upon verifiable figures, often collected previously in secondary sources. These, the macrohistorian collect together into one place for analysis. Thus, while Spence's microhistory uses the reminiscences of Huang Liu-Hung to paint a picture of miserable poverty in Shantung Province, Northern China, Kenneth Pomeranz uses studies of longevity, average income and production in China to reach his own conclusions on the standards of peasant life.^{5,6} Braudel does also employ other sources, including narratives and anecdotes, to better illustrate his work. For instance, after discussing the demographics of early-modern cities, he brings this information to life with contemporaneous descriptions of Paris.⁷

Just as there are gaps in the data for microhistories, so too are there gaps for macrohistories. Macrohistories require a huge amount of data to cover such a wide scope and a paucity of information in one area can badly damage the overall argument. Historians therefore use the techniques of social science to reach estimates with which they fill the gaps in verifiable data and from which they reach more overarching conclusions. Braudel not only uses such techniques but also explains them at length. When speaking of demographics, for instance, he uses statistics and extrapolation to reach figures for world population. However, despite his enthusiasm for the methods of analysis, he still must admit

that he can only guess the most "reasonable" and the most "probably." There is simply no way to know more exactly.⁸ Similarly, Pomeranz must be careful when analyzing Chinese demographics, as he takes his figures from estimates alone.⁹ There is, of course, the possibility that the figures in Braudel or Pomeranz are extremely accurate. Yet, they are, in the end, still estimates.

One of the criticisms most often leveled at microhistories is the applicability of the subject of the text to the greater questions posed by the author. In his review of *The Cheese and the Worms*, Samuel Cohn declares that Ginzburg "is not able to isolate the essential mental structure of an oral peasant culture" through his examination of the life and trials of Menocchio.¹⁰ Similarly, Kaspar von Greyerz concludes that, "The miller Menocchio may not be as representative of peasant culture as Ginzburg suggests."¹¹ Certainly, this would seem to be a valid concern. Menocchio was a miller. As Ginzburg himself acknowledges, millers occupied a place that was isolated from the bulk of peasant society. Not only did they invoke the "age-old hostility" of the peasants, but they also needed to maintain close relations with the nobility who retained the rights to milling. These factors, Ginzburg concludes, made millers far more open to revolutionary ideas than their peasant peers.¹² Nevertheless, he also remarks upon the place that Menocchio held within the Friuli village. Even after his first conviction for heresy, Menocchio "resumed his place in the community;" the village even reappointed him to the position of administrator (*cameraro*).¹³ This seems to imply that Menocchio was integral to peasant life and a more reasonable exemplar of peasant values than the reviewers suggest.

⁸ Braudel, 42, 46–47.

⁹ Pomeranz, 244.

¹⁰ Samuel Cohn Jr., *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* by Carlo Ginzburg; John Tedeschi; Anne Tedeschi, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12.3 (Winter, 1982), 524.

¹¹ Kaspar von Greyerz, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* by Carlo Ginzburg; John Tedeschi; Anne Tedeschi, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 13.3 (Autumn, 1982), 116.

¹² Ginzburg, 119–120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵ Spence 14

⁶ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37, 90, *et al.*

⁷ Braudel, 490

Even had Menocchio not been suitable as an example of peasant radicalism, this does not necessarily negate the value of the microhistory. Although a reader may choose to reject the broadest of Ginzburg's conclusions, the story of Menocchio can still shed valuable light upon peasant and clerical attitudes to heresy, upon the intersections of high and low culture and upon the interplay between oral and written culture in one particular region of Italy. Similarly, Jonathan Spence does not suggest that woman Wang was a standard example of Chinese womanhood or that many women fled their husbands in 17th century China. Indeed, he gives far more examples of women who remained stubbornly loyal to their husbands, such as woman Kao.¹⁴ Still, woman Wang's story tells us a great deal about contemporaneous Chinese attitudes to women, justice, marriage and loyalty.

The macrohistories of historians such as Braudel or Pomeranz potentially suffer from the opposite problem. These big histories work by painting broad brush strokes of history and run the risk of over-generalizing. They are ambitious projects, apparently intent upon creating a unified theory to explain history. However, scholars might ask whether there *is* such a unifying force in history. Karl Marx attempted to explain all history as the result of class struggle.¹⁵ Braudel, however, sees it as a rather more complex "triple division."¹⁶ Nevertheless, although Braudel rejects Marx, both clearly believe that there is a means to explain of history. On a smaller scale, Pomeranz argues a theory for the economic and industrial domination of Western Europe from the 19th century onwards. To do this, the macrohistorians must look at averages. Whether using verified or estimated data, they make general statements about a region, a state, even about a continent. While this approach might give a useful overview, it cannot stand on its own. David Nirenberg, in *Communities of Violence*, studied the causes of violence in medieval Europe. He argues persuasively that had he taken the macrohistorical approach, he would have come up with

one, simplified solution but he would have been wrong. Although violence was endemic, there was no single root cause, but rather different stimuli arousing hostilities dependent upon time and upon specific place.¹⁷ The urge to define history in terms of economics or of class would seem to deny the importance of other factors such as culture, local issues, traditions or religion.

As subfields of "new history," both macrohistory and microhistory focus upon the ordinary people. However, while microhistory might select someone who is not a true representative of the common man or woman, macrohistory seems to lose the individual in the drive for the greater picture. The narrative strategy of a historian such as Spence might have its own problems, especially with regard to full historical veracity. Still, it brings into sharp relief the lives of the people in his study far more than the vast amount of data in Pomeranz.

Although microhistory and macrohistory approach history in radically different manners, they both can be valuable to historians. Macrohistory, with its epic scope, ambition and concentration upon numerical data can create a broad canvas within which great ideas can move. However, there might be a tendency to overgeneralize and to reach for wide-ranging conclusions that prove too straightforward. Microhistory works on a much smaller scale, with more varied sources. Usually written by experts in the field, they can often give valuable insight into the complex currents running through local areas and within small cultural groups as well as within societies at large. Yet, unless the author takes care to ensure the relevance of his subject to the greater field, it could become little more than a chamber piece, a work with no wider importance. Both, to their credit, focus upon the people, and both contribute in their unique way to the sum of knowledge. Perhaps only when historians read macrohistories and microhistories in tandem, seeing them as complementary rather than contradictory, might they see the full picture of peasant life.

¹⁴ Spence, 100.

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marxists Internet Archive (marxists.org, 2005), 3.

¹⁶ Braudel, 24.

¹⁷ David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence, Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11.

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