

'A little microhistory goes a long way.' Has too much historical energy been diverted in recent decades into the study of trivialities?

Microhistory has been most consequential when applied alongside social history - moving the study away from abstractions, allowing for a well-balanced view of individual agency, and providing a new perspective for intellectual historians. Even if microhistories themselves cannot be integrated into a 'macro' project in the form of case studies, the microhistorical method also has potential to contribute to the field of global history. The methodology of microhistory, with a certain flexibility due to inconsistent availability of the sources, allows for greater interdisciplinarity and the bypass of over-used and under-scrutinised secondary sources. Although the Italian *microstoria* and French microhistory are both equally valuable, the German strand of microhistory and its sibling *Alltagsgeschichte* have made the most notable impact. Ultimately, microhistory has proven that material previously thought as trivial can make consequential contribution to historical knowledge.

E.H. Carr distinguished historical facts, validated as such by historians, from ordinary facts about the past.¹ Microhistory's worthiness of historical energy can therefore be assessed on whether its methodology can make use of facts previously considered trivial and make an impact on the study of history, and whether the microhistorical has any unique problems that have not been accepted as part of the imperfection of history. According to Ginzburg, the first appearance of the term microhistory in 1959, *Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Charge at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863* by George R. Steward embodies the restricted scale of study fundamental to all microhistories – the book covers the geographic region of a few hills over fifteen hours, with the focal event taking up about twenty minutes.² It is also a microhistory of an event which is equally consequential as larger-scale histories of the

¹ E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 1-24.

² Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', *Critical Inquiry*, 20, (1993), pp. 10-35.

American Civil War. The charge ordered by Confederate General Pickett was the decisive climax of the Battle of Gettysburg, which in turn was the decisive battle of the civil war.³ Despite its small geographic and temporal scale, among the scholarship on the American Civil War, Steward's microhistory can help explain why the war unfolded the way it did as much as larger scale studies on industry capacity.⁴ As such, Pickett's Charge is a consequential microhistory and worthy of historical energy as the study of phenomena on a grander scale. However, a topic such as the Battle of Gettysburg was never considered trivial within historiography. If triviality is understood as being inconsequential, then microhistories must be on topics that are consequential to the study of history.

Not every subject matter of microhistory is immediately recognisable as consequential, however. Nonetheless, a common feature of all strands of microhistory is the attempt to draw wider conclusions on the time period from small-scale studies.⁵ Giovanni Levi has argued that by reducing the scale of study, microhistory can reveal contradictions in our current understanding of historical phenomena, even by using allegedly 'trivial' data and subjects.⁶ Levi presents the case of revising the understanding of land transactions in western European countries and in Colonial America – although previously considered as an early example of individualistic capitalism, the significant role played by kinship structures and social relationships have rendered the traditional view as reductive.⁷ The differences between the Italian and French school of microhistory are trivial when it comes to assessing the value of microhistory, evidenced by their comparable success in achieving their aims. *The Legend of Bouvines* by Georges Duby and Catherine Tihanyi covers only one battle, yet, according to

³ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 12.

⁵ John-Paul Ghobrial, 'Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian', *Past & Present*, 242, (2019), pp. 1-22.

⁶ Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', part of Burke, Peter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 97-119.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 102.

H.E.J. Cowdrey, its purpose is to explore how the French monarchy appropriated the institutions of war and peace.⁸ David Bell, historian of the French revolution, provides an analogy linking the French microhistory tradition to its compatriot Annales school – microhistory offers “an opportunity to see the world in a grain of sand,” to restrict the scale indefinitely in pursuit of genuine total history.⁹ However, although stimulating to the imagination, Bell’s analogy could only be practical if the link between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ histories on the same topic are compatible with each other. The idea of zooming in and out on a scale ranging from micro to global history is ambitious, and Jan de Vries argues that it cannot be achieved without suffering from methodological incompatibility – microhistory and history are done with different purposes.¹⁰ Microhistories are not written with the intention of being a small part of a macro project.¹¹ *The Cheese and the Worms* could not be used as a case study among other microhistories in a ‘macro’-scale project, for example, as they do not have consistent methodologies which would allow them to build together and argue for a larger case. Although certain microhistories may force historians to reconsider their preconceived notions, microhistories as a whole cannot be repurposed as case studies in ‘macro’ histories. However, John-Paul Ghobrial argues that the microhistorical *methodology*, not microhistories themselves, can contribute to global history – in line with Ginzburg’s original manifesto, microhistory can push global historians to into new spatial contexts, surprise with material not considered before, and revise their traditional views.¹² As such, even if the full impact of microhistory on global history is yet to be seen, the microhistorical method of reducing the

⁸ H.E.J. Cowdrey, ‘Review of The Legend of Bouvines (1971)’, by Georges Duby and Catherine Tihanyi, *The International Review*, 13, (1991), pp. 557-558.

⁹ Ghobrial, ‘Seeing the World like a Microhistorian’, p. 13.

¹⁰ Jan de Vries, ‘Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano’, *Past & Present*, 242, (2019), pp. 23-36.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹² Ghobrial, ‘Seeing the World like a Microhistorian’, p. 21.

scale of study has proven useful in the decades prior, and there is no reason to doubt its potential contribution in the years to come.

Microhistory's contribution in recent decades can be most clearly seen in the field of social history – moving away from abstractions brings the historian closer to the subject, and the agency of the individual can be assessed accurately. Raphael Samuel argues that social history, part of the social turn of the 1960s alongside microhistory, prides itself on being concerned with real life instead of abstractions.¹³ The growing interest on ordinary people as opposed to the history of statecraft and politics is reflected in microhistories, especially those concerned with giving a voice to marginalised individuals. Although conventionally associated with triviality, the social-historical approach to microhistory proves to be the most consequential, a judgement supported by De Vries, who does not have as much faith in global microhistory.¹⁴ Both social history and microhistory are concerned with sources often ignored by histories with a larger scale, such as parish records, diaries of ordinary individuals, and non-textual sources such as personal possessions.¹⁵ Istvan Szijarto stresses the advantage of moving away from abstractions with the microhistorical model – in a field with seemingly infinite, equally legitimate truths, getting closer to reality is more appealing than working with abstractions.¹⁶ Thinking this way about the Battle of Gettysburg reveals a strength of microhistory: Steward's *Pickett's Charge* brings the reader closer to the reality of the battle and the civil war than histories which refer to economic trends, political representation, and military capacity. When truths are equally valid, being closer to the historical reality brings with it new perspectives, leading to less abstract interpretations. In addition, while studies with a larger scale might choose to ignore anomalies as inconsequential deviations from a trend,

¹³ Raphael Samuel, 'What is Social History?', *History Today*, 3, (1995).

¹⁴ Ghobrial, 'Seeing the World like a Microhistorian', p. 17.

¹⁵ Samuel, 'What is Social History?'

¹⁶ Istvan Szijarto, 'Four Arguments for Microhistory', *The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 6, (2002), pp. 209-215.

microhistory, by having a small scale, permits the documentation of anomalies.¹⁷ Therefore, microhistory contributes to social history by studying empirical social causality – claims that are made about societies can be further evidenced or refuted by assessing whether they had an impact on the lives of individuals.¹⁸

By reducing the scale of investigation down, microhistory allows for the agency of individual actors to be revealed. This revival of agency is also part of the German approach to microhistory, *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life.¹⁹ Brad Gregory suggests that microhistories can be categorised based on whether they implement the methodology of social history – episodic microhistory examines a case to draw wider conclusions, while systematic microhistory implements social history in a restricted geographic setting, resulting in painstaking reconstruction of individuals, families, and relationships.²⁰ In contrast to Fernand Braudel’s Annales school of history, systematic microhistory rejects the overemphasising of *longue durée* structures determining the lives of individuals and communities.²¹ Microhistory’s methodology, consistent with the value placed on nuance within other historical research, avoids the romantic notion of individuals having complete independence from outside influences.²² As such, scholars such as Ginzburg argue that by having a small scale and placing importance on nuance, microhistory is able to contribute to historical knowledge by capturing an informed understanding of human agency. However, the argument in favour of capturing accurate human agency faces two challenges: doubt over microhistorians’ ability to reconstruct the lives and experiences of individuals from sources such as parish records and incomplete

¹⁷ Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 21.

¹⁸ Brad Gregory, 'Review: Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life', *History and Theory*, 38, (1999), pp. 100-110.

¹⁹ David Crew, 'Alltagsgeschichte: A New Social History "From below"?', *Central European History*, 22, (1989), pp. 394-407.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 102.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 103.

²² *Ibid*, p. 105.

journals, and the potential conflict between the process of reconstructing lived experiences on their own terms and explaining them using theoretical tools.²³

Eamon Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath* reconstructs the lives of the thirty-three families who during the English reformation from parish records written by the local vicar Sir Christopher Trychay.²⁴ Although the records that survive for this Devon parish are exceptional, even Duffy admits that the parish records may reveal very little about the inner thoughts of the residents.²⁵ One parish record stretching thirty-three families over fifty-four years, written from the perspective of the vicar and not the parishioners themselves, cannot reveal the agency of individuals while also serving to challenge established orthodoxies in social history. The disparity between the goal of microhistory and the availability of source material has sparked the debate over the validity of historians filling in the gaps with the conditional tense – what could have happened as they do not what did happen.²⁶ As Gregory points out, the conditional tense is absent from the *microstoria* of Ginzburg, and as such, *microstoria* failed to explain systematic change over time.²⁷ The conditional tense, coupled with the use of narrative history, permits microhistorians such as Natalie Davis to not only fill in the gaps of their subjects but also make judgements on changes over a longer period of time.²⁸ However, this pushes microhistory to the very edge of what can be considered historical study – the conditional tense does not interpret existing primary sources, it assumes what non-existent primary sources would be like. The agency of the subject of microhistory is not revealed if the microhistorian speaks on their behalf. However, this is not a problem unique to microhistory – acclaimed historical studies such as *Women in Purple* by Judith Herrin employ the conditional tense to

²³ *Ibid*, p. 107.

²⁴ Robert Tittler, 'Review of *The Voices of Morebath* (2001), by Eamon Duffy, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 25, (2001), pp. 71-73.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 72.

²⁶ Francesca Trivellato, 'Microstoria/Microhistorie/Microhistory', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, 33, (2005), pp. 122-134.

²⁷ Gregory, 'Review: Is Small Beautiful?', p. 130.

²⁸ Trivellato, 'Microstoria/Microhistorie/Microhistory', p. 128.

give some voice to its subjects.²⁹ As such, microhistory's methodology is more considerate of the role of individual agency than the methodology of Annales school and does not introduce a novel problem with its occasional use of the conditional tense— historians hoping to make judgements on the impact of individuals should spend historical energy on microhistories than annals.

Scrutinising the latter challenge brought up by Gregory reveals a unique contribution of microhistory to the field of intellectual history. Gregory claims that trying to recapture the religious experience of individuals on their own terms is contradictory to the implicit secularism and atheism of modern social sciences.³⁰ The microhistorian can describe and understand 'having faith' in Morebath in the sixteenth century from the sources available, although explaining the experience of faith using secular fields such as psychology is contradictory to the aim of taking the lives of individuals on their own terms.³¹ According to Gregory, the microhistorian cannot explain and still claim to understand the people of the past as they understood themselves – as such, the microhistorian's perception of agency will be distorted.³² However, this critique could be applied to any historical study aiming to explain the past. R.G. Collingwood accepts the distortions our understanding of the past as historians are bound to their present not in language, thought, and belief.³³ E.H. Carr's response to Collingwood reveals the utility of even unquestionably distorted interpretations, that historians write histories relevant and consequential to their present.³⁴ As such, there is also the possibility that microhistories can contribute to intellectual history in two distinct ways: by studying the lives, thoughts, and beliefs of individuals not given historical attention before, and by containing within them the unique interpretation of historians influenced by their present

²⁹ Garland, Lynda, 'Review: Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium' *Speculum*, 79, (2019), p. 1094.

³⁰ Gregory, 'Review: Is Small Beautiful?', p. 108.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

circumstances. Historians of all varieties have been trying to understand and explain the past, and microhistory is no different – microhistory’s methodology does not contradict its aim in any unique way and is thus worth historical energy.

Although all strands of microhistory are united in their restricted scale of research, historians such as Thomas Robisheaux view its lack of strict or consistent methodology beyond this as an opportunity – fields as far removed as biology can contribute to history by being integrated into microhistories.³⁵ Robisheaux refers to Sara Petrosillo, a literary scholar, who made use of cognitive science, anthropology, and literary analysis to construct a new interpretation of the medieval womb, that it “carried a kind of knowing, a felt knowledge within a women.”³⁶ This novel understanding, according to Robisheaux, could only arise from microhistory as it permits, to a greater scale than other historical research, the integration of other disciplines.³⁷ However, there remains the risk that the scholar may not have equally excellent command over the fields that they are trying to integrate into their microhistory – a problem faced by all comparative studies.³⁸ Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat raise this potential problem in reference to scholars writing global microhistories.³⁹ The lack of consistent methodology is coupled with the different sources that microhistorians tend to use – as each microhistory takes the subject of study on their own terms, reliance on primary material is unavoidable. Outside of microhistory, compiling or not scrutinising which primary sources were used in secondary sources can lead to oversimplifications persisting in historical study. Microhistorians bypass secondary sources and thus avoid preconceptions about its subject matter – the feature of *microstoria* which allows for contradictions to be discovered between

³⁵ Thomas Robisheaux, 'Microhistory and the Historical Imagination: New Frontiers', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47, (2017), pp. 1-6.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 4.

³⁸ Romain Bertrand, & Guillaume Calafat, 'Global Microhistory: A Case to Follow', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales - English Edition*, 73, (2018), pp. 3-17.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

large-scale structural assumptions and micro-scale life experiences.⁴⁰ As microhistory does not bring any novel challenges by permitting greater interdisciplinarity, it is worth spending historical energy on.

Overall, the fundamental contribution of microhistory is its ability to provide a new perspective to history by reducing the scale of study. This has had the most consequence to the study of social history, notably making it easier for historians to draw more accurate conclusions about the role of individual agency. Microhistory transforms trivial facts into historical facts by drawing wider conclusions which have forced revisions on traditional views. As such, too much historical energy has not been spent on studying trivialities.

⁴⁰ Gregory, 'Review: Is Small Beautiful?', p. 105.

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