

What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice. By István M. Szigjártó and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. London–New York: Routledge, 2013. 181 pp.

Microhistory has been one of the most productive and innovative trends in contemporary historiography. The heyday of microhistory was the late 1970s and the 1980s, when its classic and most cited works were published, some of which not only produced important disputes in the field of historiography, but also reached a broader audience and became true bestsellers. And the influence of the microhistorical approach persists. Some of the most significant recent debates in the field of historiography have been connected to microhistory, including present-day disputes over postmodernism and other famous “turns”—the linguistic, narrative, anthropological, cultural, and so on.

The significance and notoriety of the trend are demonstrated by the newly published book, *What Is Microhistory?*, in which the historians István M. Szigjártó and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon try to sum up microhistory’s chief characteristics, place it in the field of contemporary historiography, and, more broadly, link it to recent works of scholarship in the humanities. It is not an easy task. In spite of the apparent similarities among microhistorical approaches, there are at least as many differences between and among the “classic” works: not only among the Italian, Anglo-Saxon, German, and French schools, but even, say, between the viewpoints and methodologies of the two most famous Italian microhistorians, Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi.

Thus, *What Is Microhistory?* has a twofold aim. On the one hand, it summarizes the most significant developments in microhistorical thought, specifying the common features of diverse works and tendencies. On the other hand, it points out the basic differences among them, and illuminates the difficulties and uncertainties inherent in these kinds of generalizations. The book also takes full advantage of the possibilities of dual authorship; because both writers are practicing (micro)historians, and because their special national and cultural backgrounds (one is Hungarian and the other Icelandic) yield exceptional perspectives, together they cover almost the entire spectrum of microhistory. Accordingly, their viewpoints afford a wider perspective than do books written by authors belonging to one or another of the leading schools of microhistory; their approaches do not seem to be bound to any given theory or methodology. The authors’ fundamental aim is to emphasize the multiple potential viewpoints from which microhistory can be appraised. Their twofold approach comprises

both the specific ways that each author sees the means and ends of microhistory, as well as the ambiguous and controversial nature of this historical (sub)discipline. *What is Microhistory?* thus offers at least two answers to its titular question, and allows the reader to formulate his or her own responses.

The first part of the book, written by István M. Szijártó, is comprehensive in character. The author summarizes the history of microhistory, describes its central tendencies, and gives a short introduction to the field's most famous works. He catalogs not just the Western (Italian, German, French, and Anglo-Saxon) books and essays, but also studies by Russian and Hungarian historians. Szijártó attempts to answer the question in the title by considering three fundamental characteristics of microhistorical works. First, he defines microhistory as "the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well defined smaller object, or a single event" (p.4). According to Szijártó, this small-scale analysis does not imply that microhistorical works are simply case studies, or that their main aim is merely the exhaustive examination of a given local phenomenon. The second fundamental characteristic of microhistory is its use of synecdoche, its examinations of the "ocean in the drop" as historians study seemingly unimportant phenomena try to answer "great historical questions." The third peculiarity of microhistory is connected to the former, and throws light upon the ideological and political stakes of this trend. According to Szijártó, this historiographical approach focuses definitively on social agency. "For microhistorians, people who lived in the past are not puppets on the hands of great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors" (p.5). In other words, microhistory's second feature does not imply any kind of determinism, or that the events occurring at the micro level are merely miniature copies of "great historical processes."

In addition to the main authors and studies of microhistory, Szijártó also surveys some other trends and tendencies that could be connected with it. Thus, besides the "classical" works, he studies some movements that do not appear to be strictly microhistorical (German *Alltagsgeschichte*, Anglo-Saxon incident analysis, etc.), but do connect to one or two of the above-mentioned basic characteristics of the discipline. For instance, the concept of incident analysis introduced by Robert Darnton involves a kind of historical examination concentrated at the micro and individual level, which comports with Szijártó's first and third criteria. However, it does not satisfy the second condition because it does not formulate great, macro-level conclusions about the structure of the given society, focusing only on individuals' lived experiences and their frames of interpretation. Szijártó thus defines microhistory in both strict and broad senses.

One of the main purposes of his survey is to connect microhistory to this second feature, the problem of “great historical questions.” According to Szijártó, microhistory cannot be regarded as mere reaction to structuralist history, nor (as some postmodern thinkers have suggested) as self-contained studies that offer only local knowledge and deny the possibility of a total history. For example, as the Dutch philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit has declared, the microhistorical works of Ladurie, Ginzburg, and Zemon Davis are clear examples of a postmodern, fragmented, anti-essentialist historiography in which “the goal is no longer integration, synthesis, and totality, but it is those historical scraps which are the center of attention.”¹ However, this interpretation of microhistory usually meets with the disapproval of practicing microhistorians who definitively avow themselves to be anti-postmodernists.² Szijártó agrees with these sorts of postmodernist views, but only to a certain degree, since, according to him, the connection between global or total history and microhistory is more complicated. One of Szijártó’s most interesting analogies refers to fractal theory and the fractal-like character of microhistorical investigation. The geometrical forms of fractals, in which the same structures appear on different levels and at different scales, are metaphors for microhistorical works. Microhistorical practice does not begin with the event itself at the micro level, but with the macro-level structure, or as Szijártó puts it, the general picture the historian has formed for him- or herself, after decades of study, about a given period. According to Szijártó, historians, in the course of lengthy research, “meet scores of individual cases, and in one of these, the only one that they write up as microhistory, they recognize the features of a whole age or the complete problems they are studying” (p.64). This general picture is not the “reality” itself, but a mental representation of it, while the given event functions as a synecdoche of this larger mental image.

In another striking analogy, Szijártó cites a famous work of literary history, Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946), which describes the chief methods for representing reality in Western literature from antiquity to the modern period. Auerbach chose seemingly random portions of great works (e.g. *The Bible*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*) and tried to demonstrate their authors’ strategies of literary representation through close readings of these tiny parts. Aside from the fact that

1 Frank Ankersmit, *History and Thropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 176.

2 See for example Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993): 10–35.

Auerbach's method resulted partly from his material situation (the author stayed in Turkey during WW2, and thus could not access all the relevant literature), the analogy convincingly illustrates the possible relationships between the micro level of parts and fragments and the macro structures of literature and society.

However, if we accept Szijártó's view of the microhistorical event as a synecdoche of the representation of historical reality that exists in a historian's mind, we can connect his viewpoint to certain elements of the postmodernist approach. The mental representation of historical reality, as Hayden White stated in his classic work *Metahistory*, is created by a poetic act in that the historian prefigures the historical field by using one of the principal tropes of poetic language.³ Thus the work of the microhistorian, the specific event he or she finds and the analysis of it, could be considered a figurative representation of this prefigured historical reality. One could also interpret the Auerbach example as a reference to the poetic character of scientific research, given his statement in *Mimesis* that his working method was partly inspired by the modernist writers of the 20th century. The most important novelists of European modernism (Proust, Joyce, Virginia Woolf) did not attempt to represent the "total" reality of their age, but picked out tiny, seemingly insignificant scenes: a single ordinary day in the life of a Dubliner in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or two separate days in the lives of an English family on a Scottish island in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. According to Auerbach, these parts represent entire realities that are only partially perceptible, and thus his method of analysis follows the representational methods of modernism.⁴ Likewise, Szijártó brings microhistory nearer to the poetic and fictional viewpoints of postmodernism, because, willingly or not, he strongly emphasizes the linguistic and poetic aspects of the microhistorian's work. Moreover, one might connect this synecdochic understanding of microhistory to certain theorists' claims to have found historical antecedents to modernist writing.⁵ And thus Szijártó's interpretation of microhistory is modernist inasmuch as he stresses the synecdochic (part/whole) character of historical analysis, whereas his emphasis on the poetic work of the microhistorian comes closer to postmodernism.

3 Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 30–31.

4 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 547–48.

5 See for example Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 111–34; Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature. Reproduction or Signification" in *The Writing of History. Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. H. Canary and H. Kozick (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3–39.

The second part of the book, written by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, uses another method and evinces a seemingly different approach to microhistory. This author bases his argumentation on three case studies. The first deals with the everyday lives of rural people in nineteenth-century Iceland, especially with popular attitudes toward death. The second is concerned with one of the most cited microhistorical works, *The Return of Martin Guerre* by Natalie Zemon Davis. Magnússon's third case study might seem peculiar at first glance, given that it is both a meta- and a micro-historical essay about the personal life of the author, specifically his love life and the texts he has produced from written documents and private memories of a particular love affair. Thus, the second part of the book does not attempt to cover the whole of the microhistorical corpus, but instead concentrates on a few local levels. These special case studies illustrate Magnússon's conception of the aims and possibilities of microhistory. As he argues it, the microhistorical approach works totally differently than larger-level investigations do, in that it uses different methods and different sources, and usually reaches different conclusions than do macro-level analyses. Magnússon's examination of Icelandic peasants' attitudes toward death includes a discussion of macro-level investigations based primarily on statistics. While from a macroanalytical viewpoint the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period of constant and steady progress in Icelandic rural life, at the individual level, according to the personal sources of the rural people themselves, a quite different, more pessimistic, even hopeless picture comes to light. Moreover, according to the author, the microhistorical approach does not necessarily have the above-mentioned synecdochic character; events at the micro level do not have to correspond to structural features of the macro level. Microhistory's change of scale (to quote the famous phrase of the French historian Bernard Lepetit) involves a change in one's view of history, too. Because the microhistorian concentrates on personal experiences at the individual level, he or she can answer only the questions that emerge at this micro scale, and thus his or her narrative will inevitably differ from the grand narratives of grand historical approaches.

The use of the phrase "grand narratives" is not accidental; Magnússon refers directly to postmodern interpretations of this concept. According to him, the microhistorical approach has a singular character in that it investigates events in their direct context, and this "singularization of history" means that microhistorical works cannot link themselves to great historical questions or "metanarratives." This explains Magnússon's specific, case-study-oriented approach, in that he does not want to give a "total picture" of microhistory or

describe a (meta)narrative for the discipline; he instead tries to demonstrate the operation of the metahistorical approach in certain micro-analyses.

The essay about the author's love life could be construed both as an example of a microhistorical study on the personal level and as a metahistorical examination of the relationship between a historian's sources and the narrative texts he or she produces from them. This is not merely an individual history, but also a brief analysis of the special case in which the subject of the narrative is the personal story of the historian himself. Magnússon gives an account of "what really happened," but also shows the differences in his approaches to the various sources, such as his personal diary, the letters of the woman he loved, and the emails this lady exchanged with her close friends about the love affair. The conclusion of his account is not a "postmodern" lamentation of the irreconcilable gap between sources and reality, but a demonstration of an approach he calls the analysis of "the textual environment" of an event. According to Magnússon, when a historian studies the textual traces of the past, he or she has to regard these texts not as mirror images of reality itself, but as complex entities whose formal and rhetorical attributes, circumstances of creation, cultural positions, and interactions are as important as any concrete statement they may make. His account reflects the difference between historian's narrative and the source materials in a specific case when the story is about him. However, it does not suggest that the event itself is inaccessible or that only multi-perspectival stories, like those of Akira Kurosawa's famous *Rashomon*, still exist. According to the author, the central opportunity of the microhistorical approach is to give up the intent to answer great questions and formulate metanarratives and instead to concentrate strictly on the micro level, on events themselves and the persons who produced and/or endured them.

In sum, the two authors' answers to the question *What Is Microhistory?* are as different as their writing strategies. While Szijártó uses a broader approach in trying to place this (sub)discipline in the greater field of historical science, Magnússon concentrates on particular works and events, emphasizing the unique character of microhistorical investigations. For this reason, the book is more than a simple introduction to microhistory. Although it is perfectly suitable as a guidebook to the subject, it is also a challenging and thought-provoking essay that leaves it to the reader to formulate his or her own personal opinions about the essence and aims of microhistory.

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