

Review Essay

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Microhistory: In General

What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice. By Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó (London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 184 pp.).

The most adequate book-length account on microhistory, I believe, would be a microhistory of microhistory. Nevertheless, there is a strong chance that it could not qualify as the best available one. While such an adequate account would certainly possess the merit of being self-explanatory, at the same time it would rather automatically reproduce its own possible shortcomings. On the other hand, other accounts might register these shortcomings, but most likely only at the price of presenting general views in a top-down manner, which is somewhat outlandish to a practice proud of its bottom-up stance. This, at least, seems to be the price that Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó are willing to pay in their book *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, which is, to my knowledge, the first book-length account on microhistory in English.

That there is this particular price to pay does not mean that microhistory was sentenced to silence about generalities. It means only that it is supposed to have its own way to arrive at them, and whatever that way may be, in order to present general views on microhistory in the form of a comprehensive account, this supposedly specific way must be given up. In other words, it is all about the way that leads to general views. While most microhistorians, including Szigjártó, are convinced that arriving at generalities is one of the most important defining characteristics of microhistory (5), the extent of agreement is significantly lessened when it comes to identifying that way. Such identification is usually regarded as the most puzzling and mysterious question one might ask about microhistory, and both authors take a shot at answering it. Szigjártó's quest for a plausible answer leads him into the world of fractals, while Magnússon has an entirely different opinion on the issue as he develops a methodological edifice he dubs "the singularization of history" with the intention to drop the general level for good. With these diverging claims, two main features of the book are already touched upon. The first is that, in one way or another, both Szigjártó and Magnússon reflect on or organize their parts around this most puzzling and mysterious issue—the issue of the micro-macro link. The other main feature is that the book, instead of being written as a single coherent account, offers two general views on the issue (distributed into two parts of the book).

These two main features are the ones I would like to reflect upon in what follows. First I will say some words about the authors and about the composition of the book while trying to provide a short overview of the two parts, then I will shift to a discussion of that puzzling and mysterious issue, highlighting Szigjártó's and Magnússon's general views on microhistory. Finally, I will introduce a third and even more general view on microhistory which is none of the views that the authors consciously propose but the view that I think lurks behind both.

Microhistory—Microhistories

It seems convenient to begin with the fact that some time ago I had the opportunity to read and comment on a manuscript (in Hungarian), a predecessor of the text which now forms the first part of the book written by István Szigjártó (in English). I was also familiar with the plan of co-authoring a book with Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon that would be something other than a coherent account, but I had no idea about what form it was going to take (from the range of available options I was aware of), especially because I had no previous information whatsoever about Magnússon's part. Now that I have become familiar with the final product, it is both more and less than I expected. It is more regarding the extent to which the authors are engaged in the discussion of the aforementioned main issue, and it is less regarding the extent to which they are engaged in each other's ideas.

Szigjártó and Magnússon—separately and together—are long time advocates of microhistory. They run their own websites (microhistory.eu and microhistory.org), organize conferences and workshops, and grab every opportunity to promote their common cause. Due to this frequent cooperation, it seems obvious to me that the development of their views on microhistory must have been influenced by and indebted to each other's views. But even if this mutual influence and indebtedness is smaller than I imagine, it still would have done good to the book if the authors had outlined their respective views in the form of a confrontation to each other's ideas. This is not to say that every now and then they do not refer to their dissenting opinions. They do. But when a book introduces two general views, then an explicit confrontation of them could be something that provides a framework for the entire common enterprise, and lacking that direct confrontation might easily result in lacking a common framework, as if, under the same cover, there were two short books on the same subject.

All this being said, on the following pages I will still refer to one single book consisting of two parts. In the first one Szigjártó provides a geographically organized historiographical overview based on an initial working definition according to which microhistory (a) intensively investigates a small unit; but (b) is still interested in answering "great historical questions"; and finally (c) emphasizes agency (4–5). This working definition serves as a minimalistic idealtype enabling Szigjártó to compare geographically distributed variations in order to identify their specific traits. The idealtype itself is more or less what is usually associated with the Italian *microstoria* of the 1970's and 1980's as practiced by the canonical figures Carlo Ginzburg or Giovanni Levi. Although it is never hard to point to predecessors retrospectively, Szigjártó mentions some possible early examples only in passing and reasonably begins his historiographical journey in Italy, as the birthplace and center of microhistory (first chapter). Then he moves on from the

center to the periphery in discussing French and German versions (second chapter) and Anglo-Saxon variations (third chapter), and finally arrives to the periphery, where the geographical organizational scheme breaks down a bit. Here Szijártó mentions not only Hungarian microhistory, but also microhistories of Russia (which are not necessarily Russian microhistories), as well as histories experimenting with form and narration that do not intend to be but nevertheless can be considered as microhistories (fourth chapter). In each chapter, the introduction of particular microhistories functions as a point of entrance to recurring brief discussions of various issues (such as the attention paid to narrative or the relationship to postmodern theories).

Now, to start a discount version of the historiographical journey, the initial working definition introduced above remains untouched in the first chapter as the ideal form of Italian *microstoria*, but the French “reception” of the second chapter points to a somewhat different direction. In France, microhistory was welcomed as one of the potential means by which the post-Braudelian Annales School could redefine its identity.¹ Due to this situation, the French encounter with *microstoria* could not mean a straight transfer of a set of easily identifiable methodological principles even if their Italian colleagues had had such things at their disposal. What Annales historians (Jacques Revel, Bernard Lepetit, Paul-André Rosental and others) did was rather that they tried to reconcile certain elements of *microstoria* with their own historiographical tradition. In doing so, argues Szijártó, they have developed a “multiscopic” history which departs from *microstoria* in refusing to attribute a special role to the micro-level. While Italian microhistory grants the primacy of the micro based on the claim that this is where answers to macro-level questions can be found, French “multiscopic” history treats each scales as equally important but regards macro-level explanations to be incompatible with micro-level agency (30–32).

In Germany, where the case was rather different, there was *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life with its focus on the lived experiences of (mostly twentieth century) historical actors, which, similarly to the French scene, was born out of a dissatisfaction with macro-approaches.² According to Szijártó, *Alltagsgeschichte* can qualify as a German equivalent of microhistory in its own right (33–34), while a second thread of German microhistory leads to the Max Planck Historical Institute in Göttingen, where some time since 1990's a few German historians engaged in historical anthropology (most notably Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm) have begun to refer to themselves as microhistorians. However, as Szijártó concedes it, “*Alltagsgeschichte*, historical anthropology and microhistory are considerably merged into one another in German usage” (38), and to further complicate the issue, other German researchers also became supporters, such as Otto Ulbricht,³ who favors a strict conception of microhistory, mostly at the expense of many Anglo-Saxon approaches.

And it is in its relation to Ulbricht's strictness that Szijártó's adventure becomes a bit ambivalent. On the one hand, although the initial working definition requires small scale investigation and a commitment to answer “great historical questions,” it does not require any *definite* micro-macro link to connect the levels of historical interest. Due to this lack of strictness Szijártó can equally embrace Italian microhistories that strongly wish to establish a micro-macro link, and French “multiscopic” histories that lack such motives. Moreover, he can also welcome Anglo-Saxon approaches despite the fact that by making use of Robert Darnton's

term he characterizes many of them as “incident analyses”⁴ which fail to address those great historical questions (53), and microhistories of Russia which are characterized by introducing the dimension of responsibility with their emphasis on agency, even if a definite micro-macro link is questionable in many cases (66–70).

On the other hand, Sziájtó’s sympathies lie clearly with Ulbricht’s strictness in predicting a bright future for microhistory on the basis of the macrohistorical relevance of the micro level. It is on this foundation that Sziájtó can hope to witness the rise of microhistory even in a new epoch of global history, claiming that the former is just another version of the latter (72),⁵ and it is on this ground that he goes on to outline his own theory of the micro-macro link. This more exclusive stance seems to contradict the generally inclusive attitude of the historiographical journey. If microhistory is just another version of global history and if there is an overwhelming temptation to create the right theory of the micro-macro link to justify macro-claims, or if there is a definite version of the micro-macro link that marks the boundaries of inclusion, then many books mentioned in *What is Microhistory?* should be treated as knock-offs that ride the waves generated by a successful “genuine” practice, in the same way *Trasmorphers*, a mockbuster of The Asylum film studio rides the waves generated by *Transformers*, an actual blockbuster. In a strict approach there is a qualitative distinction involved—a distinction that Sziájtó hesitates to make.

The fact that Magnússon does not have to face such difficulties is due to the nature of his project, which is less interested in describing how microhistory could be characterized historiographically than in explaining how it should look theoretically. Therefore, I will discuss Magnússon’s ideas more extensively in the next (theoretical) section, and for the time being I only would like to point out that his part is essentially a four-chapters-long argument in favor of a view that does not involve tinkering away at those great historical questions. The two core chapters of this argument are preceded by a case study and followed by an admirable personal narrative whose function is to support the theoretical position elaborated in the core chapters. As for the case study, it is concerned with late nineteenth-century rural Iceland’s attitude towards death, or more precisely, with what can be said about it by a micro-level investigation by using the diaries of the Jónsson brothers as a particular source. As for the emotional narrative, it is the most touching and entertaining part of the book, despite the fact that I am not convinced that it significantly contributes either to Magnússon’s larger project or to other features of microhistory he mentions in the Postscript.

This Postscript functions as a brief summary of the authors’ larger projects and as a collection of some of the subsidiary issues Magnússon left unfolded in his chapters, or issues that he did not address directly but popped up in Sziájtó’s part. These issues taken together—and not only the ones mentioned in the Postscript—form the second inconsistency of the book. Like Sziájtó’s historiographical one, this inconsistency is also far from being a fatal error that undermines the book, but still seems worthy of mentioning. On the one hand, both authors are eager to note that there are uncertainties involved in microhistorical approaches and both stress the diversity of these approaches that makes it hard to talk about a well-defined microhistory. In the dim light of these warnings the microhistorical enterprise looks limited, modest, and unpretentious. But on the other hand, disregarding their own warnings, both authors tend to talk about microhistory as one single approach (which is not a problem in itself; I will do the same later on),

and when all its features hang together, the microhistorical enterprise does not appear limited, modest, or unpretentious anymore. It just looks too good to be true.

Even if the deliberate exaggeration of outstanding capabilities might be a usual byproduct of any effort to make a case for something, it is hard not to note that in aggregate, microhistory resembles more what the German everyday speech calls *Eierlegende Wollmilchsau* than to actual microhistorical accounts. Just as an *Eierlegende Wollmilchsau* combines all-in-one the best features of the livestock (it lays eggs like chickens, provides milk like cows, meat like domestic pigs, and wool like sheep), microhistory seems to embody practically everything that has the potential to make it look attractive to fellow historians: in Magnússon's view it overcomes the dichotomy of analysis and narrative by welding them together (150); in Szijártó's view "it makes possible a harmonious blend of social historical and cultural historical approaches" (7); "it is appealing to a general public, it is realistic, it conveys personal experience and the lines branching out from its focus reach very far" (75); it can even serve as a "pedagogical model" (154–155); and, as the authors' treatment of the main issue (to be discussed in the next section) indicates, it has a cognitive advantage compared to other forms of historical writing.

The inconsistencies I mentioned are probably the necessary price to pay for the stress on multifariousness, and in terms of the introductory aim of the book, I think that the authors made the right choice. However, the book has a second, more narrowly defined but also more ambitious aim: to contribute to a scholarly debate about the representativity question, thereby facilitating further discussions on microhistory. In the remainder of this essay I would like to discuss the general views of the authors and introduce a third one which, I think, underlies both.

Microhistory—Two General Views

Given Italian microhistorians' intention to reveal something about society and culture in general on the one hand, their (although not exclusive, but dominant) interest in outsiders, outcasts and in the powerless of history on the other, and given their conviction that a close study of them and their tight environment is the scale on which revelatory insights can be gained into larger units without falling prey to reduction, there was a pressing need to justify the leap between the small and the large in cognitive terms from the very beginning. Since 1977, when Eduardo Grendi coined the fragile term "exceptional normal"—with which both Szijártó and Magnússon deal (19–20; 149)—countless efforts have been made to explain what it is supposed to mean; to exchange it for better justifications; to turn everything into methodology; to devise the real microhistorical method; to explore the characteristics of such methods devised by others; to deny the possibility of a transition between the scales; to do so with and without arguing for the primacy of the micro; to forget completely about the macro; or to do any combination of these, or more. This methodological race is the one that Szijártó enters with his fractal conception of the micro-macro link and Magnússon with his "singularization of history."

The peculiarity of Szijártó's approach lies in the claim that if there is a specific microhistorical way to gain knowledge of the past, it not only cannot do without the general level, but it is already founded on a "general picture" which is not merely the final result of investigation, but also the precondition of it.

Szjártó pictures an entire process outlined on the occasion of discussing a Hungarian book written by Lajos Für,⁶ who actually did not wish to write microhistory, neither methodologically nor in any other sense. Nevertheless, Szjártó regards his book as an unintended example of it, which has its point of departure in an incident at a small village called Bercel, where a landlord got badly beaten by another in 1784. Für detects larger historical processes within the incident, and the reason why he is able to do so—according to Szjártó—is the following:

Having worked for several decades as an agrarian historian, Für had an overall view of the agriculture and rural society of eighteenth-century Hungary. Studying archival sources, he came across the incident at Bercel and recognized an overall pattern in that single case. The microhistorian imagines a general picture, and suddenly recognizes its pattern when meeting a particular case. The decisive moment is that of selection. Microhistorians work long decades in archives and they 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 problem they are studying (64).

This “recognition” is the “sudden crystallization” of microhistorians “experience earned as a researcher, a realization of something hitherto obscure, the flame of intuition lit suddenly following a long preparatory phase” (64). To name this intuition or revelatory moment, Szjártó turns to Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of abduction. Aside from the question of to what extent can Peirce’s abduction (a form of logical inference that certainly involves “guessing”) be interpreted as intuition, the revelatory moment requires a certain condition under which it can take place at all. And this condition is what Szjártó attributes to the fractal-like nature of microhistory.

Fractals are mathematical sets, or, more generally and mathematics aside, systems based on self-similarity: the repetition of the same or almost the same pattern on all scales of the set or the system. In the last half a century, mathematicians, natural scientists, social scientists, historians and other scholars have “discovered” countless natural, economical and socio-cultural phenomena with fractal dimensions, out of which Szjártó mentions the self-similarity of the daily and monthly changes in cotton prices, the railway network of Europe, Bach’s music and Picasso’s paintings (63). Next, he argues that the micro-macro relationship is more or less the same as the relationship between the daily and monthly changes in cotton prices, except that in the former case “self-similarity is found between two sets of homogenous data.” Contrary to this, he imagines self-similarity between “History” on the one hand and microhistory on the other as the self-similarity of two representations: of “History” as “an imagined, only latent and unrealized representation” and microhistory as “a limited therefore realizable representation” (64).

Given that in the next section I will introduce a third general view of microhistory which unites the authors’ views, I do not wish to provide here an overall critique of Szjártó’s fractal approach. Nevertheless, I would like to mention some difficulties his proposal might have to face. Although my primary reservation concerns the entire methodological enterprise (microhistory treated as a method), the following remarks and questions might show certain points where Szjártó’s arguments are vulnerable to methodological criticism. Later, after introducing it, I will do the same to Magnússon’s general view as well.

The first difficulty Szijártó has to face is that a fractal-like nature means patterns within patterns and the repetition of the same or almost the same pattern on all scales. And if every scale is just the same, then neither the “micro” seems to have a primacy, nor does it seem to matter on what level one might enter. If every scale is the same, it is not clear in what sense this could be an argument for *microhistory* in the strict sense. The second difficulty I would like to mention is more practical and can be summarized in the following question: if the first requirement of the revelatory moment is having a general picture painted by the colors of hard-worked years of coping with archival sources and/or of extensive readings into the supposedly accumulated knowledge of one’s research area, then what about younger fellows? Is there an age-limit for doing microhistory, is it only for experienced veterans? Finally, my third remark is that it is not clear in Szijártó’s account if the initial “general picture” and the one that eventually appears in a microhistory are the same; whether the revelatory moment is the “recognition” of something already known or is it a new insight. If it is the first, then what is the point in *writing* microhistory? Just because things suddenly become clear on the occasion of meeting with something small, why should anyone present the insights gained in this way in the form of a microhistorical account? On the other hand, if the initial “general picture” and the one that eventually appears in a microhistory are not the same, then isn’t this just a version of the hermeneutic circle, the part and the whole constantly throwing new light onto each other?

Whatever Szijártó’s intentions may be here and whatever answers he could give to the questions above, in Magnússon’s view he makes the mistake “most social and cultural historians” make, namely, “to put the main emphasis on seeking ways to incorporate their own research units within greater wholes (contextualization)” (115). To avoid this mistake Magnússon offers the prospect of “the singularization of history”, which is not a description of what microhistory is, but a methodological contemplation of what it should be,⁷ having its point of departure in postmodernism. Magnússon, unlike the majority of microhistorians, embraces postmodern theories and thinks that Italian microhistorians’, and especially “Ginzburg’s intransigent opposition to postmodernism militated, in the end, against the influence of microhistory worldwide” (114). Magnússon therefore attempts to atone for past mistakes by drawing on the postmodern hostility towards “grand narratives” as he thinks that a reliance on them is exactly what maintains worn-out standards of the entire historical enterprise in the following way: “the grand narrative, whether masquerading under the name of modernization, the Enlightenment, Christianity, socialism or whatever, determines the questions that research is expected to ask, the form of the main argumentation and the positioning of the research within the world of academic study” (116).

It is this scene that the “singularization of history” enters as the potential means to liberate history “from the ‘manmade’ ideological package of the meta-narratives” (123). By getting rid of that package, the mistake of contextualization is supposed to be avoided by studying all aspects of a given subject in close detail. In a research conducted in Magnússon’s way, “the focus will always be fixed on the matter in hand, and on that alone” (122). Magnússon, however, is aware of that a focus on the matter in hand alone—if such focus is possible at all—would leave that matter literally alone or estranged, with no relation to anything other than itself, without any meaning or significance. Thus, he has to concede that even if “grand narratives” are eliminated, there must be something else involved

to provide a frame, “some structural orientation”, something “more malleable”, with frames “more limited and more easily controlled” (122).

Arriving to this point, the contours of this mysterious substitute for context remain unclear; and this point, the point where Magnússon silences is the point where my remarks begin. First, it is questionable if the “grand narrative” is the proper target of Magnússon’s effort to liberate history from what he regards to be the burden of social and cultural history. This burden is not always referred to as “grand narrative”, but also as “contextualization” or, conforming to Szijártó’s choice of words, the desire to answer “great historical questions”. However, seeing events, characters, beliefs, and so forth in the light of a “grand narrative” and seeing them in one or another context are not the same; a “grand narrative” might certainly function as a context, but it is far from being the only way of contextualization. And even if Magnússon wishes to drop “contextualization” together with “grand narratives”, what remains is not necessarily a mysterious substitute, but, even in Magnússon’s own examples, just another context.

In the case study mentioned in the previous section Magnússon, actually, relies on a more familiar notion of context; a notion that has nothing to do with “grand narratives.” He deploys this familiar notion of context *before* he turns to his single incident, and eventually he happens to promise another one, regarding an entire society, which comes to life *as a result* of the investigation of his incident:

In the final part of this chapter I shall apply the methods of microhistory to a single incident from the lives of the brothers from Strandir, an incident centering on death, the grief in engendered, and the tactics used to cope with it. Before doing so, I shall need to consider death more generally as a phenomenon in Icelandic society. The particular example, it seems to me, opens up a new perspective on how death was perceived within this society—what it meant to the people involved. (84)

My second remark concerns the pragmatic difficulty that postmodern theories, seeming to reach their age of retirement, are perhaps not the best ally one can imagine nowadays. While it is just a practical concern, my third remark raises the stakes by pointing to the possibility that postmodern theories, in general, would not be the best ally of “the singularization of history” even if they still were fashionable. Notwithstanding the issue of “grand narrative”, Magnússon’s project wishes to satisfy a desire to which postmodern theories are characteristically hostile: the desire to recover past actuality.

To clarify this aspect, I would like to draw attention to Magnússon’s words that “the ideology of ‘the singularization of history’ is grounded in the fact that it is impossible to know more than a tiny fragment of the story” (115). Although these words imply a distance from the desire to know the whole story, at the same time they presuppose its existence, unveiling an ontology which was a target of criticism not only in postmodern circles, but also in the more modest circles of analytic philosophies of history. Whereas postmodern historical theories often treated the belief that there is a past actuality in the shape of a story waiting to be discovered as if it was a conscious choice made by historians (hence the intention of these theories to transform historical practice they theorize about), analytic philosophers of history like Louis Mink rather talked about a presupposition that

no historian would consciously hold as a belief.⁸ It seems to me, that the complications of Magnússon's efforts to exhibit his commitment to postmodernism and to outline his project at the same time begin where he either consciously or unconsciously falls prey to this presupposition.

As an epistemological consequence of this ontological presupposition, even if "the singularization of history" concedes its incompleteness and even if it turns to the aforementioned fragments instead, it does so in order to recover past actuality in its fragmentary incompleteness. Magnússon wishes to get as close as possible to what he happens to consider as past reality. His ultimate goal is to find "an autonomous manifestation of the past" (136), and his project "is first and foremost a search for a way in which history can research its proper subjects in their proper logical and cultural context" (123). As far as I know, while these aims are not far from the aims of the great majority of respectable historical approaches to the past, they clearly contradict postmodern theories of history according to which no such "autonomous manifestation of the past" is accessible by whatever method. The reason why Magnússon nevertheless wishes to take a shot at it leads back to the rejection of "grand narratives", an idea he seemingly shares with postmodern theories. However, the motivation behind the postmodern mistrust in "grand narratives" was not the elimination of a distortive force; it was not the liberation from a "manmade" ideological package. In the view of postmodern theories, roughly speaking, all we have are "manmade" packages: ideological, linguistic, ethical, and so forth. The singularization-project, I think, contradicts such claims, exactly because Magnússon seems to entertain the idea that "grand narratives" are just obstacles to overcome, and by overcoming them, historians would find themselves in the comfortable position to knock on reality's door, let alone, in the even more comfortable position to open that door with the right methodological key.

To avoid misunderstandings, I do not wish to argue for or against neither postmodern historical theories nor Magnússon's desire to recover past actuality. The only thing I would like to do is to register the contradictory claims they entail and point to the fact that "the singularization of history" is better evaluated as it stands on its own feet, without begging authorization from philosophical positions. Further, I wish to stress again that my remarks about Magnússon's endeavor, together with the ones about Szijártó's approach, might be the basis of different methodological critiques of the authors' views, whereas my intentions cannot be properly critical as I do not wish to propose an alternative methodological approach to microhistory in which I could anchor such a critique. Unlike Szijártó and Magnússon, I am not a microhistorian, and my interest in microhistory is based on a view even more general than the views presented in this section. Thus, in the final part of this paper I would like to sketch this view that I think informs all methodological stances on microhistory.

An Even More General View of Microhistory

As a short summary of what has been said so far, I would like to note again that in the book various aspects of microhistory tend to turn into discussions of the puzzling and mysterious issue of the micro-marco relationship. Despite all the differences in their treatments of this relationship, Szijártó and Magnússon seem to share a deep agreement over what constitutes microhistory: its cognitive claim.

Regardless of whether it is close to or far from their intentions, in arguing for microhistory they both argue for a method understood in epistemological terms, and their ultimate answer to the question that their book bears as a title is that microhistory is the method, and probably the right one, to gain reliable knowledge of the past.

I have two modest reservations about such views. The first one runs parallel to Anton Froeyman's views as they appear in his yet unpublished paper.⁹ In Froeyman's approach, cognitive claims form only one layer of microhistory, and beside its experiential and ethical layers, are probably not even the most important ones. It might easily be that the attractive force of microhistory both to fellow historians and to non-historians lies not as much in its hardly justifiable cognitive claims as in its exposed experiential qualities and in its ethical concerns for its subjects of study. Although Magnússon and Szijártó, of course, talk about these experiential qualities—and in discussing microhistories of Russia Szijártó even enters into the realm of ethics—their book is built upon the primacy of the cognitive layer. Since my main reservation is indifferent to epistemological issues, I do not wish to run arguments supporting Froeyman, only to point to other equally important dimensions of microhistory in whose light epistemologically oriented answers to the "What is Microhistory?" question look considerably narrow. However, in the light of my main reservation not only Szijártó's and Magnússon's views, but even Froeyman's three layers prove to be too narrow. In my view, there is something that underlies all of these views, something that unites them, something like a condition of possibility that gives birth to the pluralism of methods and the layers of microhistory.

This condition of possibility is microhistory as a perspective, or, in other words, a microhistorical perspective. What unites microhistorians, I think, is not how they go about their research in epistemological terms, but the way they look at their historical actors. Or, to put it more precisely, what unites microhistorians is what they presuppose of human behavior, human capabilities, or human existence in general.¹⁰ Whereas there is an undeniable variety regarding their methods (which involves an undeniable variety of conceptions of historical knowledge), including all efforts surveyed or proposed in *What is Microhistory?*, they all grew out of the same perspective. This perspective is a historiographical variation on the otherwise well-known Protegorean principle that "man is the measure of all things" (by which, as it will be clear soon enough, I wish to highlight something other than the so often exploited "relativist" aspect of the figure and teaching of Protagoras).

In philosophy, the early pragmatist Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller talked about his "humanism" as being the spirit of pragmatism based on the Protegorean principle, of which Schiller derived the following philosophical consequences:

It must frankly be admitted that *truth is human truth*, and incapable of coming into being without human effort or agency; that human action is psychologically conditioned; that, therefore, the concrete fullness of human interests, desires, emotions, satisfactions, purposes, hopes and fears is relevant to the theory of knowledge and must not be abstracted from.¹¹

What I would like to suggest by quoting Schiller is that the Protegorean principle heuristically prefigures microhistory with respect to the scholarly activity we call

history the same way as it prefigures pragmatism with respect to the scholarly activity we call philosophy.

It does not mean, of course, that microhistory is the practical manifestation, let alone, the blindfolded practical application of pragmatist philosophy in any sense. It means only that microhistory and pragmatism share the perspective of the Protagorean principle as a heuristic device, which, in their own respective and specific contexts, enables pragmatist philosophers to argue for a variety of theories of knowledge and enables microhistorians to argue for a variety of microhistorical methods. It means that whereas the consequences of the Protagorean dictum concern theories of knowledge in philosophy, they concern conceptions of society and culture in history. According to all of this, and by paraphrasing Schiller, the perspective that I think unites microhistorians entails that the concrete fullness of human interests, desires, emotions, satisfactions, purposes, hopes and fears is relevant to any conception of society and culture and must not be abstracted from. This, of course, is not the negation of coercive forces historical actors had to face while stumbling in their past socio-cultural environments. The microhistorical perspective is rather the exploration of the interplay of human activity and these coercive forces in terms of the Protagorean principle and the exploration of the boundaries of the principle and thus the perspective itself.

In my view, this microhistorical perspective, in one way or another, is constitutive of all the microhistorical accounts Szijártó mentions throughout his historiographical journey. By entailing that there is no such thing as a single microhistorical method, it resolves the inconsistency between welcoming, say, Anglo-Saxon "incident analyses" one the one hand and microhistory as just another version of global history on the other. Microhistory as a perspective does not tell historians anything about what method they should favor or what relationship they should postulate between the micro and the macro. The only thing it does is that it prohibits abstracting the macro from human concerns, but it does not suggest anything about how not to do that or what to do instead. Magnússon's "singularization of history", insofar as it takes seriously human concerns, is in the same way born out of this perspective—just as Szijártó's fractal approach or French "multiscopic" histories. In the light of this perspective, even the stakes of Magnússon's enterprise become clear: he wants to get rid of "grand narratives" because he thinks that it necessarily involves abstracting from human life.

Unlike the authors of *What is Microhistory?*, I am not convinced that microhistory understood in methodological terms could or should be of a great influence on history and historical thinking in general. Due to their particularity, these methodological proposals seem to advocate the exploration of the boundaries of human behavior in their own restrictive terms: while they are all able to cast light upon certain forms of behavior, they all exclude other forms. Unlike these proposals, microhistory as a perspective that enables the variety of methods could inspire rather than restrict historical experiments and has, so to say, more perspective in this sense. And given that this perspective is the common ground that underlies even Szijártó's and Magnússon's methodological dissent, I suppose that they would be happy to see it winning over more and more supporters, occasionally even at the expense of their particular methodological proposals.

All this, I know, makes up an embarrassingly general view of microhistory; far more general than the general views of the authors. This view, however, integrates

their dissenting views, and the particular formulation I have just given to it is due to an engagement with the ideas presented in their book which exhibits itself as debate on microhistory. As a debate, it naturally aims to facilitate further debate, to which I tried to contribute to in this review, and, after all, what better could be said about a book than that it fulfills its aims?

Endnotes

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1. On the Annales School see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Stanford, 1990); or Joseph Tendler, “The Annales School: Variations on Realism, Method and Time” in *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, eds. Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (London, 2013), 67–80. For an inside perspective (with a strong leaning towards the history of mentalities) see André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History* (Ithaca, 2009).

2. On *Alltagsgeschichte* the classical historiographical volume is *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (Princeton, 1995). On the career and current potentials of *Alltagsgeschichte* see Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy and Pamela E. Swett, “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter,” *The Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2. (2008): 358–378.

3. See Otto Ulbright, *Mikrogeschichte: Menschen und Konflikte in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009).

4. See Robert Darnton “It Happened One Night,” *The New York Review of Books* 51, 24 June (2004), 60–64.

5. For similarly positive views on the compatibility of global history and microhistory see Angelika Epple, “Globale Mikrogeschichte: Auf dem Weg zu einer Geschichte der Relationen” in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des ländlichen Raumes / Themenheft: Im Kleinen das Große suchen: Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis*, eds. Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler, (Innsbruck, 2012) 37–47; and Francesca Trivellato Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011) Retrieved from: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>

6. Lajos Für, *A berceli zenebona, 1784: Kísérlet a történelmi pillanat megragadására* (Budapest, 2000).

7. Throughout his part of the book Magnússon prefers to talk about “the ideology of micro-history” and regards methodology merely as technical aspects of this ideology. For reasons which will become clearer in the last section of this essay, this ideology still seems to be no more than a method understood in epistemological terms.

8. Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, 1987), 188.

9. Froeyman, A. (2012) “Three Layers of Meaning in Microhistory” (unpublished paper). Retrieved from: http://www.inth.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/HTSubmissionReadingMicrohistory-1_.pdf.

10. Giovanni Levi’s words, according to which microhistory “has always centered on the search for a more realistic description of human behavior”, might be instructive here. Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1991), 94.

11. Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller, *Studies in Humanism* (London, 1907), 182.

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