Digital Humanities in Practice

WEEK 6a On Microhistory

Microhistory as a theoretical & methodological approach to writing history

First developed by Italian historians in the 1970s as an experiment, microhistory swiftly became one of the most innovative ways of researching and writing history.   The first microhistorians were 'born' through their dissatisfaction with predominant social history methods that focused on broad subjects over very long periods of time.

Like all good histories, a microhistory begins with a research question or a set of questions. It's the second step that distinguishes microanalysis: the **reduction of the scale of analysis**, sometimes drastically.

The Methods of Microhistory

In addition to zooming in on an individual, a community or a unique event, a historian might use other microhistorical practices to illuminate the past, perhaps switching to narration not just to "tell a story" but also as a method of shedding bright light on hidden aspects of a historical person or group of people: for example, Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola,* or Alessandro Portelli's *The Order Has Been Carried Out.*

Some commonly used methods and interpretive microhistorical practices include:

- Privileging first-hand accounts ('ego documents') to explore historical actors' experiences.

- Tracking clues through multiple sources to **discover hidden connections**, like a sleuth following every lead to its smallest detail to see where those details unexpectedly collide.

- Reconstructing webs of social networks.

- **Scaling an analysis down or up** to highlight specific historical contexts and perspectives.

Microhistory draws on the fields of cultural anthropology, ethnography, and literary and philological studies, among other disciplines.

Microhistory reinfuses the past with its own vibrant energy because finely crafted microhistories capture the drama of everyday life. They let readers understand people as agents of change for the worlds they live in, often in the face of overwhelming difficulties. For example, the return of a soldier to his village becomes a riveting tale about identity and imposterhood in Natalie Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*. An exchange of gifts among women tumbles a land into panic, revealing the frightening and hidden dynamics of witchcraft driven into the life of one woman at the center of the storm, as told in Thomas Robisheaux's *The Last Witch of Langenburg*. Rumors of a slave uprising that spread through a city allow Jill Lepore in *New York Burning* to reveal the dynamics of race at the street level in New York of the 1740s. The way women create whole worlds in a society is sometimes best explored through microhistory, like Laurel Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* (see also resources below), or Jon Sensbach's account of a slave woman missionary who helped inspire the rise of black Christianity in the Atlantic world, in *Rebecca's Revival*.

Microhistories can bring to light the experiences of everyday people in big, well-known historical events, sometimes in ways that challenge the common wisdom, surprise and even shock us. For instance, the legacy of the German Occupation of Rome in World War II looks entirely new when told through the stories of everyday Romans collected, re-told and interpreted by Alessandro Portelli in *The Order Has Been Carried Out.* James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* shows in acute brushstrokes how everyday racial oppression in the Jim Crow South was even more violent and harrowing than many histories reveal.

Today microhistories often serve as correctives to grand historical narratives, big theories, and Big Data studies. Well crafted microhistories discover microworlds of experience barely glimpsed at larger scales of historical study, illuminating the dynamics of human history in rich colors and textures.

Microanalytical Methods

- Reduce the scale of analysis and use different scales of analysis. Finding just the right focus is the mark of well-designed microanalysis.

- Creatively use narrative to craft a story or construct an analysis.

- Identify and interpret "ego documents" – objects or parts of documents that reveal historical figures' own perspectives on their experiences.

- Design a project around the "exceptional normal," an event that seems unusual, striking or sensational, but which can become a window onto important everyday patterns, values or ideas.

- Identify and track clues in documents to discover hidden connections. This method involves learning the unique features of different genres of sources, the ways they were created, the language and concepts that shape them, and in the process heightening your sensitivity to be able to identify something striking, unusual or important that you might have otherwise missed.

- Deploy historical contexts for meaning and interpretation of evidence or sources. Every source points to multiple historical contexts. Which ones should you be alert to?

- Do social network analysis. Most people live life in a web of relationships: family, friends, neighbors, and others. Learn to track them, identify the significant ones for your study, and interpret them to reveal hidden or subtle social dynamics.

- **Digitally visualize historical networks** to reveal connections that might otherwise go unnoticed.

- Traditionally biography is one way to understand the individual in her or his historical world. Microhistory allows other ways to foreground one small moment or aspect of an individual's life.

- Discern the difference between a case study and microhistory. Frequently confused with the case study, microhistorical methods set up an investigation around singular, unique objects, not patterns or "cases." What can the singular and the unique teach us?

- Use trial records and other tricky sources. Microhistories have pioneered new ways of using records that have in the past been dismissed as too biased.

A microworld **involves something singular, specific, unique** — the world of experience of an individual or group of connected individuals at a particular moment in time. It's a slice of intimately lived history, a personal story that reveals hidden details of the past — conflicts or beliefs or values — that broad histories can often glide over or smother.

 You can build a microworld from a person or group of people, but also from a single object or event, making that object or event the center of your microhistorical analysis.

Credit: microhistory summary adapted from Tom Robisheaux, Duke University

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Reading and Resources

"Microhistory ." Encyclopedia of European Social History . . Encyclopedia.com. (February 1, 2020). https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/microhistory

Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (1991)

Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson, 'What Is Microhistory?', *History News Network* https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/23720

http://www.microhistory.org/ *is run by the Center for Microhistorical Research at the Reykjavik Academy in Iceland. This is a website for the various projects about microhistory, including bibliography on published microhistorical works, studies on memory and postmodernism.* (note: the website doesn't seem to be maintained any more)

Examples of Microhistory Works/Projects

- Natalie Zemon Davis, The Return of Martin Guerre (1984) describes a soldier's return to his village. See also this Wikipedia entry describing the 1982 movie. Interestingly, Zemon Davis's book stems from her work as the historical consultant on the movie. Zemon Davis's summary biography is relevant. See also Robert Finlay, 'The Refashioning of Martin Guerre', The American Historical Review, Vol. 93, No. 3 (Jun., 1988), pp. 553-571.

- John Brewer, *Sentimental Murder: Love and Madness in the 18th Century* (2004) describes the Martha Ray case of 1779: bloody murder on the steps of a theater.

- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich describes Martha Ballard's diary. More information here, although the site is a little dated. Cameron Blevins also carried out a topic modeling project on the same material.

- Thomas V Cohen's *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* is a record of a dying woman's conversations.

- <u>Storytelling and the Global Past</u> is a discussion between three microhistorians including a discussion about the secret life of a globe-trotting religious convert,

- Donwon Shin, <u>Applying the Methodology and Practice of Microhistory: The Diary of a Confucian Doctor, Yi Mun-gon</u> (1495-1567), *Korean Journal of Medical History* 2015;24(2): 389-422.

- <u>Farah Griffin talks about her book</u> *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics During World War II* which focuses on three African-American artists.

- Peter Marshall, *<u>Mother Leakey and the Bishop: A Ghost Story </u>*(2007) describes sightings of a ghost on Halloween.