

Oct. 22. The New Cultural History[1]: Microhistory

Microhistory and New Cultural History

Microhistory means the focus on small incidents, insignificant in themselves, which reveal larger structures. The workers in a French factory kill their master's cats [Darnton]; Some Chinese rebels run around cutting off queues [Kuhn]; a man returns from the wars claiming to be Martin Guerre, but some people in his village think he is an impostor [Davis]; the Inquisition interrogates a miller in an Italian town because he believes that the world was originally created as a giant cheese [Ginzburg]. Why should these curious incidents matter? In Hayden White's terminology, studies like these rely on the literary trope of synecdoche: a small part represents a larger whole. "By the trope of Synecdoche ... it is possible to construe the two parts in the manner of an *integration* within a whole that is *qualitatively* different from the sum of the parts and of which the parts are but *microcosmic* replications" [p.35; example given is "He is all heart"]

This approach derives also from cultural anthropology's focus on symbols and rituals that represent a common shared culture. Anthropologists generally do field work in only one village, but from their micro-study they claim to derive conclusions about the wider field in which their place is located. Geertz clearly sees the Balinese cockfight as not just an interesting game, but as a dramatic event that reveals basic understandings of the Balinese about what their lives mean.

What has this approach added to historical study? It makes it possible for us to write about some of the most interesting details in our sources, events which wouldn't ordinarily fit in the main narrative. Most bureaucratic sources are quite tedious; often it is the daily routine that is the central subject of social history. Here's a way to include the fun stuff. It also reveals hidden details of personal lives that don't come across in official documents, statistical surveys, or political programs. What look like offbeat, grotesque, curious, peripheral aspects can, by reflection, illuminate the central institutions.

"New cultural history" in general pushes this program farther. Foucault's influence has led historians to look in hidden niches for clues about the core power relations of a society: asylums, prisons, medical clinics, unusual sexual practices all reveal a great deal about rationality, justice, science, and concepts of the self. By looking at what is excluded and how it is negated, we can understand what is affirmed: rationality is defined by opposition to insanity, etc.

What are the risks of these approaches? Anthropology and history have been rival cousins in the social sciences for some time. They share the focus on the particular place and the local experience, unlike the generalists of political science and economics. But they diverge widely in method. First, many historians claim that classical anthropology neglected the state. Its focus on the self-contained village community isolated the community from the larger power structures in which it was embedded. [Fischer & Marcus] This was the main problem of the Redfield "little tradition" studies which have influenced work on Chinese popular culture, for example. We soon discovered that little and great traditions could not be easily distinguished. Second, conflict between classes,

genders, races, religions, and institutions tends to get played down when you stress common understandings. Though the French master and his workers fought for power, they both had the same understanding of what "cats" signified. But can we always assume that in cases of conflict and oppression [the historical norm] both sides really have much in common? Eugene Genovese can be similarly criticized for providing an organicist, conservative model of slave society that emphasizes negotiation between master and slave and not brutality.

Third, anthropologists tend to be ahistorical. They write in the "ethnographic present", leading to the implication that the culture described somehow stands outside of temporal change. Microhistorians are also tempted to take their little events and jump from them to large cultural generalizations [see Darnton's conclusions about "Frenchness", criticized by Roger Chartier; Ginzburg's hypothesis of a large underground European popular anti-elite cultural resistance, criticized by La Capra]

Finally, there is the question of authority. A historian's analysis, in principle, can be checked by looking to his original sources. Of course, it is not that simple: nobody checks all the footnotes of another work, and another researcher might interpret the documents very differently. But at least there is a way to check up. It's not really possible to go to the anthropologist's village and see if we agree with him: usually the informants are kept anonymous, the place is not identified; even if someone does go back, it will be at a different time, talking to different people. Some great anthropological controversies have developed when a researcher went back to a classic site at a different time, with different questions: someone revisited Redfield's original Mexican village and came up with different conclusions; the most acrimonious debate broke out when Derek Freeman went to Samoa and found it extremely different from Margaret Mead's version; Or look at the contrasting perspectives on the Chinese family of Margery and Arthur Wolf, or Ella Wiswell and Robert Smith in Japan. They were husband and wife teams, both trained as ethnographers, who lived in the same village: one spoke mainly to the men, and got a picture of stern traditionalists, respect for ancestors, and social order; the one who spoke mainly to women heard about bawdy sexuality, intimate spheres of childhood, and an entire "uterine family" which classical Chinese culture claimed did not exist. Men and women within the same village seemed to live in different worlds. How can one person embrace the whole?

Microhistory, too, has to rely on a rather small collection of documents, which can't be easily cross-checked. Anthropologists are getting very self-conscious these days about their position in relation to the societies they study; this self-consciousness undermines claims to discover general cultural truths. Historians are also getting increasingly reflexive, worrying as much about the reliability of their sources as about what they say. With historical demography, the researcher can claim that even if individual reports are unreliable, collecting a large number of standard reports will yield a plausible average; with microhistory, it's hard to tell how representative the individual event is.

Even when anthropologists use historical sources, fierce controversies are unavoidable. Examine the arguments between Obeyesekere and Sahlins over the Hawaiians' views of Captain Cook. Sahlins claimed that Cook's arrival in Hawaii came at just the time in the Hawaiian ritual cycle when they expected a god to appear, so they worshipped him as a God; when Cook returned, he came at the wrong time in the cycle, so they killed him. Obeyesekere attacked Sahlins for imposing Western ideas of ritual on how natives think:

he claims, from his experience of ritual as a Sri Lankan, that rituals do not work in such simplistic fashion. Plenty of heat, and some light here.

It's not that historians don't get into fierce arguments too; but do the kinds of arguments made, and the way texts are interpreted, differ substantially between historians and anthropologists? We both make large claims to understand the perceptions of other people long dead, or very different from ourselves. Why can't we all just get along? Finally, much of this work moves enticingly toward the border between fact and fiction. Historical fiction has been for a long time the professional historian's envied rival: far more people read Walter Scott about the Middle Ages, or learn about the Kennedy assassination from Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*, than learn from professional historical work. Some historians call for abolishing the boundary altogether, as Simon Schama has done in *Dead Certainties*, and as Jonathan Spence did in *The Death of Woman Wang*. How legitimate is this practice? I don't think erecting rigid barriers is possible, but I do get nervous when some historians claim that it doesn't really matter what is verifiable, or that the "return to narrative" means that we could win back readers by writing exciting stories regardless of their truth. Then I think of Goya's phrase, "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos [The sleep of reason produces monsters]", and wonder how we could refute a revisionist who claims that the Holocaust is nothing but a fable. There is such a thing as going too far; good fences make good neighbors; we should keep insisting that history is not identical with fiction, or anthropology; not everything goes.

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