

of the series, this undertaking represents an indispensable instrument for all those interested in arriving at a deeper level of understanding what *Sovietisation*, as a whole, meant. Regarding this concept as a process or a project, applied and tested for the first time in Russia, by a radical and revolutionary elite on its own population, and then extended to the Russian hinterland and, eventually, in the post-war period, to the Soviet Bloc countries, the documents published here capture the initial phase of the phenomenon, the experiments and the political opportunism of the Bolsheviks. As suggested by these documents, the mutual assignation of blame and the dichotomy between the victims, the population, on the one hand, and the executioners, the Bolshevik leaders, on the other, reveals the political overcharge of this tragedy, while also explaining the later characteristics of the regime. These are all arguments in favour of attentively exploring the documents included in this useful and necessary instrument for understanding the Soviet regime.

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**SIGUNÐUR GYLFI MAGNÚSSON, ISTVÁN M. SZIJÁRTÓ, *WHAT IS MICROHISTORY? THEORY AND PRACTICE*. LONDON – NEW YORK, ROUTLEDGE, 2013. ISBN 9 780415 692090. 181 P.**

This volume provides the first systematic and accessible overview of the origins, evolution and methodology of microhistory. The two sections of the book, which are, indeed, situated between theory and practice, suggest a different, yet complementary perspective on the subject under examination. The first section, which bears the signature of István M. Szijártó (Department of Social and Economic History, Eötvös Lóránd University, Hungary), has a pronounced historiographical character, while the second part, written by Sigunður Gylfi Magnússon (Centre for Microhistorical Research, Reykjavik Academy) is a personalised exploration of the actual practice of microhistory. Both authors have produced numerous studies, articles and books devoted to this subject, so this book incorporates the experience they have accumulated in the study and practice of microhistory.

The first chapter begins by presenting probably the most famous works of microhistory in Italy, written by Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg. Szijártó's analysis suggests that Italian microhistory has set out to provide an alternative to analyses based on quantitative methodology (promoted by the Annales School and currently facing an impasse), by inserting, in historical discourse, characters and experiences that are as real as possible (see the protagonists of the narratives *Inheriting Power* and *The Cheese and the Worms*) in order to create a personalised image of the past. Besides the aforementioned representatives, the chapter also outlines the research directions of S. Cerutti, C. Klapisch-Zuber and M. Gribaudi, lesser known authors who have extended microscopic analysis onto social groups, phenomena and situations. This chapter reveals that the goal of Italian microhistory is to provide answers to the great historical questions by engaging in a detailed analysis of particular individuals, phenomena or communities. At the same time, it brings to the fore the reluctance of the Italian School to embrace postmodernism and other historiographical trends that are prone to exaggerate the relativist approach to the historical past.

The second chapter acquaints us with the achievements of the French and the German historiographies. The first step is to introduce us to the famous work entitled *The Vanishing Children of Paris* by A. Farge and J. Revel; then, based on this presentation, the chapter outlines the main features of French microhistory. The historiographical scope is broadened by

references to the works of G. Duby (*The Legend of Bouvines*), A. Corbin (*The Village of Cannibals*), and then by the detailed presentation of the two famous works written by E. Le Roy Ladurie (*Carnival and Montailou*). After a systematic enumeration of specialised literature, information is provided about the various theoretical works (edited by Revel and B. Lepetit) that address the impact of microhistory on French historiography. The chapter continues by presenting the German trends that are related to microhistory, such as Alltagsgeschichte or historical anthropology. The differences between the approaches of the three trends are revealed by highlighting the ideas of A. Ludtke, B. Gregory, H. Medick and J. Schlumbohm. The actual analysis of the German microhistorical works (A. Imhof, W. Behringer, W. Reinhard and O. Ulbricht) suggests that just like in the Italian case, the German School considers that microhistory has a broad significance, insofar as the story of an individual is granted meaning and significance in a wider context.

Chapter three examines a series of works situated on the margins of microhistory. The critique formulated against M. Shahlins (*Captain James Cook*), Darnton (*Great Cat Massacre*) and Geertz (*Balinese Cockfight*) by their Italian and French colleagues suggests the vast discrepancy between the continental and the Anglo-Saxon perception of microhistory, as well as the difference between anthropological and microhistorical approaches to the past. In this context, the debate focuses on the incidental analysis practised by G. Stewart and Z. Davis, and also by other authors whose works break through the mould of conventional microhistory, as are, for instance, L. Ulrich, the Browns, A. Taylor, R. Kagan or J. Brown. According to Szijártó, the microanalysis practised by the Anglo-Saxon historians differs from the more classical approaches in that these authors are not interested in the questions of history. The situation is further complicated in the case of American historiography, where, as a rule (see G. Bruckner, S. Ozment or Hsia), narratives are devoid of a general perspective. This chapter does, however, present a few works of social history based on microanalysis, such as A. Macfarlane's famous book on Ralf Josselin and D. Sabean's monographs. Also in this context reference is made to P. Boyer and S. Nissenbaum, J. Contreras and J. Demos. The last subchapter lists several authors whose works are reminiscent of the Italian definition given to the concept of microhistory (G. Ruggiero, T. Astarita).

The last part edited by Szijártó focuses on methodological questions and enumerates the decisive factors for achieving a successful work of microhistory, such as experience and the time dedicated to the analysis of a particular phenomenon. In this context, mention is made of L. Für, the author of the most successful Hungarian experiment of this kind, and Gy. Benda. This is where the gap between Szijártó's and Magnússon's conceptions of microhistory emerges: while the latter believes in the particularisation of history, placing microhistory on the side of social history, the former advocates acquiring in-depth knowledge of the past, for only thus will microanalyses be able to answer the big historical questions. The last subchapters of the first part discuss the relationship between grand history and the responsibility of historical actors in the light of Russian microhistory (O. Koshelev, Y. Anisimov, O. Figes, A. Zamoyski), and then through the lenses of the fictionalisation of history (J.P. Demos, S. Schama, R. Bisha) and the globalisation of microhistory.

The first four chapters of the book have, therefore, a historiographical character, charting a geographical overview of the origin, evolution and perception of microhistory, as well as its relation to historical anthropology, social history or even postmodernism. We would like to draw attention to the controlled nature of the narrative, in the sense that Szijártó's historiographical investigation is not marked by preconceptions and prejudices (as we shall see in the second part, signed by the Icelandic author), but it does leave room for a subjective interpretation, based on the accurate analysis of an extremely varied bibliographical material. The originality of his part

resides in the fact that it brings under debate sources that are independent from microhistory, such as the works of the literary historian Auerbach, the Frankfurt Critical School or Kracauer's film theories. The first part of the volume actually reveals Szijártó's optimism and enthusiasm as regards the capacity of microhistory to rally the achievements of social and cultural history and to give a complex and, perhaps, the most nuanced picture of the past. In his conception, microhistory enables a direct experience of history, by bringing historical actors and personal experiences closer to the present, with a view to accomplishing a higher purpose, namely accessing the structures of great social history by way of examining singular experiences.

And this is where the great rift between the two parts of the book lies. The part written by Magnússon has an overwhelmingly personal character, as its author is a real player in the field of universal microhistory and refuses to comply with the generalising trends of history. While for Szijártó microhistory is, for now, *solely* the subject of historiographical analysis, for Magnússon microhistory is reality itself, the only narrative/historiographical structure capable of rendering his experiences concerning the past.

Part two launches the major theoretical questions in the first, introductory chapter, whose main subject refers to attitudes towards life and death as they emerge from the numerous personal narrative sources (compiled over a span of 22 years) by a peasant called Halldór Jónsson. The notes from Halldór's diaries and correspondence concerning these rites of passage are placed in the sanitary context of modern Iceland (the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth), suggesting that the high rate of mortality (caused by factors pertaining to hygiene, geographical circumstances, attitudes towards breastfeeding, or epidemics) resulted in the emergence, amongst the Icelanders, of an emotional defence mechanism (for the modern reader, characterised by indifference rather). Apart from the extremely compelling and evocative narrative, *The Doctor's Tale*, however, does not place enough emphasis on the gender gap between diaries and correspondence, which entails that the private or public nature of the daily entries has also not been emphasised enough.

The second chapter focuses on perhaps the most publicised/fictionalised historical narrative (in literature, film and music), namely that of Martin Guerre. Magnússon chose this work precisely because the story of Arnaud, Bertrande and Martin has received a number of interpretations over the years, both from artists and from historians. The chapter outlines the characteristics of microhistory by presenting the dispute between R. Finlay and Davis. Magnússon goes even further, by discussing the pitfalls of the grand narratives and the relationship between microhistory and postmodernism, based on the dialogue between Ginzburg and Gundersen, concluding that microhistory accepts many postmodern ideas, but cannot disavow either the truth or the context. In this sense, Magnússon advocates the singularisation of history (like B. Rosenwein has done insofar as the history of emotions is concerned) and endorses the acceptance of the limits which constrain historians over the course of their scientific investigations. Thus, for Magnússon the future of research in the areas of cultural and social history and in microhistory resides in the particularisation of history.

The next chapter begins with the description of a personal scientific experiment. This is where we may find one of the protagonists of the first chapter, namely Niels Jónsson, seen through the lenses of discoveries of the author's independent, which nonetheless partially refuted the conclusions about Niels' personal life he had formulated a few years before. This later finding reinforced the Icelandic author's belief that, contrary to the perception of the Italian and French Schools of microhistory, which are still marked by an obsession with great history, the only manner of acquiring insight into the subject under study is through singularisation. This concept involves a detailed investigation of the studied phenomenon and nothing but, bringing into discourse only those sources that are directly related to it, the purpose being that of shedding

light on potential contradictions, tensions and uncertainties. Still, even so, the image obtained can always be modified, nuanced or completely changed by unexpected sources.

The last chapter is undoubtedly the most challenging part of this volume. There is a succinct presentation of the reasons why I-documents should prevalently be used in historical research, and the relationship between biography and microhistory is emphasised. Despite the fact that this part deals with the relationship between the biographical self and personal narratives, we find no reference to the methodology of biographical source analysis (apart from a brief mention of G. Genette). Magnússon's text focuses on the biographical self by analysing his own emotional experience. The outcome of this experiment is a research model that reveals the main pitfalls of personal narratives, underscoring the importance of awareness as regards the selection process to which individual memories are subjected. The Icelandic researcher draws attention to the interpretability of historical/social/emotional events and to the gap between the lived experience and the one written down on a page. Although we are reluctant to accept without reservation the individuals' ability to analyse their own I-documents, Magnússon's findings are of real interest to those involved in the analysis of personal sources. Notwithstanding all this, it is unfortunate that mnemo-historical approaches are altogether absent here, in the sense that Magnússon's undertaking is an ambitious, but isolated project, because it neglects all the achievements and contributions of researchers in the field of biographical study.

The postscript of the book summarises the Magnússonian conception of microhistory. The chapter discusses methodological issues, such as the importance and significance of normal exceptions, of narrativity, of sources, of the individual (where, at long last, we find a few paragraphs from J. Kalela's works on the different forms of memory), as well as a possible approach to microhistory in the pedagogical system. The chapter and, respectively, the book end with a very interesting foray into the historical and biographical work of perhaps the most vocal critic of microhistory, Hobsbawm, presenting, based on the latter's works, the limitations of his scientific and biographical writing.

For researchers working on personal narrative sources, Magnússon's views on historical writing and its singularisation or particularisation are rather easy to accept. In the world of I-documents, generalisations are not possible. There are certainly similarities pertaining to genre, construction and rhetoric, but personal experience is unique and, apparently, independent of structures and great history. Those who have used personal narrative sources tend to relativise and are reluctant to accept the grand historical truths, because their sources primarily reflect personal attitudes (irrespective of whether they are actually the result of social or cultural circumstances). Hence, we believe that the author's vision of microhistory should be interpreted and understood starting from the nature of his sources.

The book is therefore addressed to all those who do not know yet, or not enough, the consecrated works in this field and who are keen to expand their knowledge. Szijártó and Magnússon's work is just a start, the authors do not provide definitive answers, and sometimes their conclusions are not the ones we might expect, but this volume certainly offers a wide range of interpretations, rendering it as an intellectually challenging undertaking.

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