

Chapter 9

From Macro- to Microhistory: The History of Everyday Life

Increasingly in the 1970s and 1980s historians not only in the West, but in some cases also in the Eastern European countries, began to question the assumptions of social science history. The key to the worldview of social science history, as seen by its critics, was the belief in modernization as a positive force. In its most radical form this belief was voiced in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay "The End of History,"¹ which proclaimed that a modern technological society based on capitalist free market principles accompanied by representative parliamentary institutions signified the achievement of a rational order of things as the outcome of historical development. A good deal less sanguine, other social science-oriented historians such as Jürgen Kocka, aware of the destructive aspects of modern societies, nevertheless expressed their confidence in the overall positive character of modernization, whereby a market economy and a highly developed technology would be coupled with democratic political institutions guaranteeing civil liberties, social justice, and cultural pluralism.² For Kocka the collapse both of Nazism and of the Marxist-Leninist systems in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union seemed to confirm this point. A key function of a critical historical social science was, in his view, to point at the atavistic aspects of social orders in the twentieth century that stood in the way of a truly modern society, as Wehler and he had done in their analysis of German society before 1945.

For Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, two of the most important representatives of microhistory in Italy, the key reason for the decline of macrohistorical conceptions and with them of social science approaches to history was to be found in the loss of faith in just this optimistic view of the beneficial social and political fruits of technological progress.³ The arguments made against macrohistorical social science approaches, which included Marxism, were based on political and ethical grounds even more than on methodological ones, although, as we shall see, the Italian school in particular subjected the basic assumptions of social science history to a searching methodological critique. A key objection to the social science conception of a world historical process characterized by modernization was, in their view, the human cost. This process, they argued, has unleashed not only immense productive forces but also devastating destructive energies that are inseparably linked with them. Moreover, it has taken place, so to say, behind the backs of people, primarily “little people,” who had been neglected as much in social science-oriented history as they had been in the conventional political history that focused on the high and mighty. History must turn to the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by common people. But the kind of history of everyday life that Fernand Braudel had offered in the 1960s and 1970s in *The Structures of Everyday Life*⁴ for them missed the point by attending to material conditions without examining how these conditions were experienced.

We have already pointed to the role that political beliefs played not only in the scholarship of the older school of political historiography but also in more recent forms of social history and, of course, in Marxism. They play the same role, and perhaps a more readily apparent one in the new microhistorical studies of everyday life. It is not coincidental that in Italy many historians, like many of their British colleagues, began as professed Marxists and then moved in directions that challenged the basic macrohistorical conceptions of Marxism. The subject matter of historical studies moved, for the historians of everyday life, from what they call the “center” of power to the “margins,” to the many, and the many are for them overwhelmingly the disadvantaged and the exploited. This stress on disadvantage and exploi-

tation distinguishes this historiography from older romantic traditions of the history of popular life such as the nineteenth-century ethnology of Wilhelm Riehl.⁵ While Riehl looked nostalgically back to an idyllic folk society free of inner conflicts, the historians of everyday life emphasize the lack of harmony.

The many, however, are not viewed by these historians as part of a crowd but as individuals who must not be lost either within world historical processes or in anonymous crowds. Edward Thompson had already made clear the motivation of his history when he proclaimed the aim of *The Making of the English Working Class* to be “to rescue the poor stockinger . . . [and] the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver . . . from the enormous condescension of posterity.”⁶ But if one wishes to rescue the unknown from oblivion, a new conceptual and methodological approach to history is called for that sees history no longer as a unified process, a grand narrative in which the many individuals are submerged, but as a multifaceted flow with many individual centers. Not history but histories, or, better, stories, are what matter now. And if we are dealing with the individual lives of the many, we need an epistemology geared to the experiences of these many that permits knowledge of the concrete rather than the abstract.

By the 1970s a history that anchored culture in a firm political, social, and economic context had been prepared in the great works of George Duby on marriage, the perpetuation of national myths, and the social structure of feudalism⁷ and in Jacques Le Goff’s works on intellectuals and clerics and conceptions and patterns of work.⁸ Le Goff and Duby also succeeded in writing a social and cultural history in which narrative and individuals played a central role, as in Duby’s work on the Battle of Bouvines on Sunday, July 27, 1214, as a historical event that was transformed into a national myth (1973),⁹ and most recently in Jacques Le Goff’s 1996 biography of St. Louis.¹⁰ In the course of the 1970s studies of popular culture became more frequent in the English-speaking and the Italian world, as in Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in 16th and 17th Century Europe* (1971),¹¹ Peter Burke’s *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978),¹² Natalie Z. Davis’s *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975),¹³ and Carlo

Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1975),¹⁴ in all of which religion occupies an important place, in Davis's case with a strong focus on gender.

There is no reason why a history dealing with broad social transformations and one centering on individual existences cannot coexist and supplement each other. It should be the task of the historian to explore the connections between these two levels of historical experience. Nevertheless a vigorous debate took place in the 1980s in Germany between advocates of a social science history, who called for strict conceptual and analytical guidelines, and the champions of everyday history, for whom these guidelines meant the death knell for lived experiences, which they ardently believed should be the true subject matter of history.¹⁵ In a crucial article, "Missionaries in the Row Boat" (1984)¹⁶ Hans Medick sought to stake out the basic positions of everyday history. For this history, cultural anthropology as it was represented in the seventies and eighties by Clifford Geertz served as a model for historical research. This semiotic approach is pursued in Geertz's conception of a "thick description,"¹⁷ which means an immediate confrontation with an other. It also means that we do not wish to read our preconceptions into the other but to recapture it as it is. Nevertheless, at this point Geertz and Medick become enmeshed in a seeming contradiction because the thick description they call for does not give us access to an individual but only to the culture in which he or she is bound up. Thus the "poor stockinger," whose individual dignity Thompson set out to rescue from the impersonal forces of history, now again loses his individuality to a culture since we are able to gain insight into the individual only through the culture that shapes him or her. Neither the ethnologist nor the historian, according to Geertz and Medick, has immediate access to the experience of others. Therefore he has to continue to decipher these experiences indirectly through symbolic and ritualistic acts that, proceeding beneath the immediacy of individual intentions and actions, form a text that makes access to another culture possible.

Kocka criticized Medick's approach, which he described as a "neohistoricism" (not to be confused with the New Historicism in the United States discussed earlier) on two grounds: Like the

older historicism, its emphatic renunciation of theory and its insistence on immediate experience, in his opinion, led to a methodological irrationalism. One cannot have coherent insight into reality if one does not proceed with explicit questions that help us to locate what we are looking for in the immense multitude of experiences. For Medick the very approach to our subject matter with carefully formulated questions prejudices our findings; for Kocka the absence of these questions makes meaningful knowledge impossible. Moreover for Kocka the concentration on the “small” aspects of history isolated from broader contexts renders historical knowledge impossible and leads to the trivialization of history. There is therefore a danger that the history of everyday life may deteriorate into anecdotes and antiquarianism.

Now for Medick “small is beautiful” by no means signifies an anecdotal history cut loose from larger contexts. In fact, Medick insists that history should move from concern with “central” institutions to the margins, where individuals who do not conform to the established norms are to be found.¹⁸ Nevertheless the individual can only be understood as part of a larger cultural whole. Thus the microhistory he pursues cannot stand without a macrosocial context. Not only the *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history) that Medick represents in Germany, but also microhistory as conceived by its Italian advocates, to whom we shall come below, assumes the existence of a comprehensive popular culture. Hence the turn to historical anthropology with its semiotic approach to the symbolic expressions of culture. For the Italians this is a peasant culture that has endured since primordial times.

At this point the protoindustrialization project launched in the early 1970s at the Max Planck Institute for History should be mentioned. The focus here was on a small unit, the peasant household. Franklin Mendels, a Belgian American who coined the term “protoindustrialism” in 1972,¹⁹ focused on the interplay of economic forces and regenerative practices in these households. According to him cottage industries in a period of increasing demand for textiles led to an early form of industrialization and furthered the increase of population, with earlier marriages and more children, to meet the need for labor. Important studies along these lines were carried out in Great Britain and elsewhere

in the early 1970s²⁰ and helped inspire the German project, resulting in 1979 in a collaborative volume, *Industrialization Before Industrialization*,²¹ concentrating on the development of domestic industry in the countryside prior to the Industrial Revolution. Despite the reservations these historians expressed in regard to the systematic social sciences, which in their view left too little space for human initiative, they relied heavily in their work on the hard social sciences, primarily economics and historical demography. They operated with concepts of social differentiation and of a market economy that derive from classical political economy. In this sense they worked within a conceptual structure similar to the one we already noted in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's analysis of the interplay of food prices and population pressures. Nevertheless with the stress on the family as the key unit in the productive process, new foci enter. From the hard framework of a quantitative demography, we move into the much more concrete setting of families in which protoindustrialization brings about changed reproductive patterns involving early marriages and childbearing as property relations change. Work patterns too change. The studies show to what extent spending, saving, and work are determined not only by economic pressures but by questions of status and honor expressed through conspicuous consumption.²² Thus to understand the nature of a rural protoindustrial community we need to go beyond economic and demographic analysis to the consideration of culture.

In the 1980s the main participants in the protoindustrialization project at the Max Planck Institute for History, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm, joined by an American, David Sabeau (who at the time was at the Institute) proceeded from their more general studies of protoindustrialization to an examination of the process in a specific locality, Medick²³ and Sabeau²⁴ in two villages in Suabia, Laichingen and Neckarhausen, Schlumbohm²⁵ in the parish of Belms in Westphalia. On one level this is a continuation of older forms of social science research. A tremendous number of data is fed into the computer, particularly concerning property inventories at marriage and death as well as vital statistics, trial records, literacy, etc. The result is a host of information that relates to culture. Inventories,

for example, yield information on book possession. The focus is on one village or locality over a period of approximately two hundred years, from the old regime to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Despite the frequent tribute they pay to Geertz, their approach is very different. Instead of thick description, they work with hard material and societal data, which they then interpret. The Geertzian conception of a culture as an integrated semiotic system—not entirely different from the romantic notion of a village community that we find in nineteenth-century ethnologists like Wilhelm Riehl, nostalgic for a simpler and more harmonious folk culture—is replaced by one that sees differentiation and conflict. Moreover, the history of the localities takes place within the context of the great political, economic, and social changes in the transition from a premodern to a modern society. Although they dislike the concept of modernization, these historians work with it, in awareness of the “costs.” They are thus much closer to traditional social science history and much further removed from historical anthropology than they concede.

There are great similarities and yet fundamental differences between the anthropological and microhistorical historians in Germany whom we have just discussed and the Italian practitioners of *microstoria*. Despite similarities in their political outlook, they come from two different traditions. The main representatives of the Italian tradition, Carlo Ginzburg, Carlo Poni, Giovanni Levi, and Edoardo Grendi, began as Marxists.²⁶ They reacted against Marxist doctrines on two grounds: One was their rejection of the authoritarian aspects of the established Communist parties. The second, which they reiterated repeatedly, was their loss of faith in the macrohistorical conceptions that Marxism shares with non-Marxist conceptions of growth. They wished to give history again a human face, which led them to react not only against traditional Marxism but also against the analytical social sciences and the *Annales*. The latter avoid the narrowness of the two former, but Braudel’s house of history, as Levi notes, has many rooms permitting a variety of outlooks and approaches—but there are no people living in.²⁷

The practitioners of *microstoria*, like their German colleagues, want to return to the life experiences of concrete human

beings. They preserve three elements of the Marxist historical orientation, two of which they share with the Germans: The first is the belief that social inequality is a central characteristic of all historical societies. The second is the role production and reproduction play in the formation of cultures. Economic forces, they insist, do not offer an explanation for social and cultural aspects of life, but they enter into them. They constitute significant causes of social inequality without which history cannot be understood, although inequality takes on forms that extend far beyond political, economic, and social inequality as it has been traditionally conceived, particularly in the Marxist tradition. The third is the belief that historical study must be based on rigorous method and empirical analysis. While critical of traditional Marxist and social science approaches, they avoid the belief, voiced by Geertz and taken very seriously by Medick in his essay on the missionaries, that history gains many of its insights from poetry, a position voiced also, as we have seen, by Hayden White and adopted by American cultural historians like Natalie Davis²⁸ for whom, at least in their methodological statements, the borderline between fact and fiction becomes fluid. For the practitioners of *microstoria*, the line is much less fluid. They insist that the historian deals with a real subject matter. Their criticism of traditional social science approaches is not that social science is not possible or desirable but that social scientists have made generalizations that do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life they claim to explain. There is nevertheless a certain contradiction between theory and practice in the writings of both the German and the Italian orientation. While the Italians remain skeptical of what they consider to be Geertz's methodological irrationalism, they too, particularly Carlo Ginzburg, move in their historical narratives to a position close to Geertz's thick description. Conversely, the Germans worked from the start closely with social science methods involving computer analyses of long series.

Unlike the German microhistorians, the Italians have had a firm institutional basis in the journal *Quaderni Storici*, which since its founding in 1966 had occupied a place in Italy not dissimilar to the *Annales* in France or *Past and Present* in Great Britain as a forum for a broad spectrum of historical approaches.

In Germany *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* played such a role, but with a much stronger social science orientation. Only with the founding of *Historische Anthropologie* in 1993 did a German journal come into existence representing the viewpoint of micro-history and historical anthropology.

Significantly the new journal published in its first volume an article by Carlo Ginzburg on the Italian tradition of *microstoria*.²⁹ The article essentially restated ideas that Ginzburg and Poni had first put forward in *Quaderni Storici* in 1979 and in other programmatic statements elsewhere. They pointed to the crisis of macrohistory as part of an increasing disillusionment in the 1970s with grand narratives. Large-scale social scientific studies based on massive quantitative computerized data were questioned, not because a social scientific approach was inapplicable but because the large-scale generalizations distorted the actual reality at the base. A basic commitment of *microstoria*, according to its practitioners, is “to open history to peoples who would be left out by other methods” and “to elucidate historical causation on the level of small groups where most of life takes place.”³⁰

There are affinities between the theoretical and methodological positions articulated by the advocates of *microstoria* and those of Foucault and Geertz, but also marked differences. Like Foucault they seek to show how “hegemonic institutions have excluded certain ways of thinking as demonic, irrational, heretical, or criminal,”³¹ as Ginzburg did in the case of his miller philosopher and cosmologist Menocchio³² and Levi did in the case of the parish priest Giovan Battista Chiesa.³³ And like Geertz their aim is an “interpretive” study of culture that needs to be approached “through single, seemingly insignificant, signs, rather than through the applications of laws derived from repeatable and quantifiable observations.”³⁴ In Levi’s words: “The microhistorical approach addresses the problem of how we gain access to knowledge of the past by means of various clues, signs and symptoms.”³⁵ Yet they continue to insist that there is a reality external to the historical texts that can be known. Admittedly knowledge is mediated. Because it is, microhistorical method “breaks with the traditional assertive, authoritative form of discourse adopted by historians who present reality as objective.”³⁶ Going back to a form of presenta-

tion that preceded that of professionalized historiography, *microstoria* introduces a narrative in which the historian transmits his/her findings but also his/her procedure. "In microhistory . . . the researcher's point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account."³⁷ The narrative becomes important for the presentation of the historian's findings because it can communicate elements that cannot be conveyed in abstract form and because it shows the process by which the historian arrives at his/her account.

Yet despite these limitations placed on objectivity, *microstoria* shares several basic assumptions with older social science that serve to distinguish it from Foucault's and Geertz's approaches. For Foucault, Edward Muir notes, "theories cannot be verified because standards of verification come from a modern scientific discipline that makes the past conform to the present. Correctness means conformity to an order of things that has been defined by a discipline or an institution."³⁸ For Ginzburg and Levi this is "an evasion. Correctness must be determined by the concrete, physically real evidence the past presents us."³⁹ *Microstoria* does not reject the empirical social sciences in toto, but stresses the methodological need of testing their constructs against existing reality on a small scale. It questions Geertz's approach to culture on similar grounds. Despite Geertz's claim that he deals with a world on a small scale, he adheres to a macrosocial conception of a culture as an integrated system, a whole. As Levi notes: "It seems to me that one of the main differences in perspective between microhistory and interpretive anthropology is that the latter sees a homogenous meaning in public signs and symbols whereas microhistory seeks to define and measure them with reference to the multiplicity of social representations they produce."⁴⁰ The result is a society marked by "social differentiation."⁴¹ Here considerations of hegemony and social inequality, which were prime concerns of Marxist historiography, shape the historical conception of the microhistorians.

We shall briefly examine two of the most representative works of the *microstoria* tradition, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1975), and Giovanni Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*

(1985). These books have much in common and yet are very different in their conceptual and narrative approaches. Ginzburg's book has become a classic, perhaps also because it reads so well and confronts us with a very rich individual. Levi's exorcist is much more deeply embedded in social structures and the text is more analytical. Both books share the general characteristics of *microstoria*, the concentration on an individual in a given locality and the attempt to stress the difference of this very local setting from a larger norm. In both there is a careful reconstruction of the social and political setting, with the focus again on the local rather than on a broader transregional level. And yet Ginzburg's approach to his protagonist, Menocchio, is much more hermeneutic than Levi's. The primary focus is on Menocchio's mental world. And the way into his mind is through the texts he reads. Reading is not an impersonal process by which meanings are communicated; rather the writings of elite minds enter into the mind of the peasant miller through the prism of a popular culture. In turn Ginzburg's own imagination is vital in the reconstruction of Menocchio's thought processes. The narrative is interrupted by the presentation of the investigative strategies of the author. Levi's concern is much more social scientific, to test or correct established hypotheses. There are frequent passages spelling out hypotheses to be confirmed. A central concern is the pattern of power relationships in the village. These cannot be understood in terms of economic factors or formal political institutions. Levi questions the extent to which impersonal forces of the market and the development of a modern state machinery determined these power relationships. He argues that the decisive element in the understanding of the peasant world was "the preservation or transmission of intangible or symbolic goods: power and prestige."⁴² To establish his point, he resorts to the sources and methods used by more traditional social history, a prosopography that relies on parish registers, notarial acts, data from land-tax surveys, and other administrative documents to reconstruct the lives of the persons exorcised by Chiesa and their social setting. He also relates data on land sales to data on the constitution of families and inheritance to demonstrate that in the place of the blind market of classical economics there operated in the village a complex market in which social and personal relationships,

involving family strategies, played a determining role in establishing the price level. The peasant community of the village of Santena thus is not merely the passive object of macrosocial changes but has a distinctive input. Finally the idyllic image of a highly cohesive peasant society free of conflicts collapses in the course of this analysis.

Thus we see again in the work of the Italian microhistorians, particularly Levi, as we saw with the Göttingen group, that microhistory is an extension and not a repudiation of older social science history, a rediscovery of culture and the individuality of persons and small groups as agents of historical change. Nevertheless the societies and cultures to which microhistorical approaches are applicable appear to have both spatial and temporal limits. The charge that microhistorians examine small communities with little or no reference to a broader context is not justified, at least not in the works we have examined. There have been no comparable historical studies, however, of modern urban communities, although work in urban anthropology has been done. All of the works we have discussed deal with a preindustrial world or with the transition of this world into the early stages of industrialization. In part it was possible to deal with villages like Neckarhausen⁴³ or Santena because they were relatively self-contained and self-sufficient even if they could not fully escape the impact of state administration and of the market. Today Neckarhausen has become in large part a dormitory town whose population commutes to employment or business activities in large population centers.

There is an obvious conflict between certain of the theoretical statements of the microhistorians and their actual research and writing. They rightly stress the discontinuities within history and deduce from them that no grand narrative is possible. But they operate with a largely negative evaluation of modernization. Although they find conflicts and divisions in the premodern communities they study, they regard their passing with a certain degree of nostalgia. That is, they turn to microhistorical communities not simply because the sources exist to study them microhistorically, but also because of a certain dislike for the modern world. Many *Annales* historians may have been similarly motivated to turn to the medieval or early modern world. In a num-

ber of recent anthropologically oriented works, such as Eric Wolf's *Europe and the Peoples Without a History*⁴⁴ and Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: Sugar in Modern History*,⁴⁵ dealing with the expansion of Europe into the non-Western world, modernization, seen as a destructive force, constitutes a red thread. This is also frequently the case in medieval studies, as in Jacques Le Goff's already mentioned famous essay "Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages," about the origin of the modern concept of time. Although Foucault has emphasized that history has no unity but is marked by "ruptures," his works about insanity, clinics, and prisons assume that the course of modern history is characterized by increasing discipline in daily life. This is also the basic idea in the works of Robert Muchembled, who, like Foucault, links the development of the bureaucratic state in early modern France with the exclusion of nonconformist, marginal groups. And it is also the theme of Norbert Elias's essentially macrohistorical *The Civilizing Process*,⁴⁶ which was first published when he was in exile in 1939 and became known only after it was republished in 1969; it traces the disciplining of manners. Here Elias put forward the thesis that, beginning with absolutism, a courtly culture developed that subjected bodily functions such as eating, digesting, and lovemaking, which were formerly practiced relatively uninhibitedly, to new, strict rules and banished them to the private sphere. Certainly discipline has taken on more administratively organized forms in the modern world, but it is doubtful that it was less pervasive in the premodern world that these authors have romanticized to such an extent.

Several criticisms have been raised repeatedly against the microhistorians: (1) that their methods, with their concentration on small-scale history, have reduced history to anecdotal anti-quarianism; (2) that they have romanticized past cultures; (3) that because, as already suggested, they purportedly work with relatively stable cultures, they are incapable of dealing with the modern and contemporary worlds marked by rapid change; and (4) in this connection that they are incapable of dealing with politics.

Nevertheless, there have been serious attempts to use micro-historical approaches to deal with political conflicts in the twen-

tieth century. What links the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*)⁴⁷ in the modern and contemporary period with the microhistory dealing with preindustrial society is the commitment to go beyond impersonal social structures and processes to the concrete life experiences of human beings. Lutz Niethammer, whose primary concern is to explore the everyday world of the working classes, including working-class women, questions how much value price and wage statistics or governmental reports have for understanding the conditions within which people have operated. Here again microhistory is seen not as an alternative to analyses of large-scale social and political processes but as a necessary supplement. At the center of microhistorical investigations stand men and women who have been neglected in the traditional sources. Biographies and memoirs play an important part in the reconstruction of their lives, but obviously in most cases those sources are not available. Here, too, oral history can make a contribution. Oral history has been used particularly to deal with the victims and more recently also the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and most recently the victims and perpetrators of the Stalinist persecutions and massacres. Admittedly there are problems with interviews, particularly when these are gathered several decades later, when the memory of those interviewed has been affected by consequent events and experiences. Nevertheless interviews can be checked against other evidence and other interviews for corroboration. Local history groups have often used oral history methods to communicate the life experiences of common people for their own sakes, but particularly in Germany, and in recent years in the former Soviet Union, these methods have been used as part of a reconstruction of recent history.

There have been questions difficult to answer by traditional methods of political and social analysis. Alf Lüdtke, closely associated with the microhistory group at the Max Planck Institute for History in Göttingen, asked how the historical catastrophes of the Germans in the twentieth century were possible. How does one explain that the working classes, who were organized within a social democratic movement supposedly opposed to German policies leading to war, largely supported the war in 1914 or why indeed in 1933 there was virtually no open resis-

tance against the Nazis among workers but, indeed, widespread support?⁴⁸ Older sociological categories of class require careful scrutiny and modification. Carefully conducted in-depth interviews can throw light on the complexity of political and social attitudes. Thus workers imbued with a work ethic and proud of standards of German workmanship performed well in war industries, no matter what their political outlook was. Between the poles of political opposition and support there was a broad spectrum of resistance in the workplace, which took a variety of forms. Two major oral history projects organized by Lutz Niethammer among industrial workers, the first conducted in the Ruhr region,⁴⁹ the second in Eastern Germany in the last days of the German Democratic Republic,⁵⁰ probed into personal recollections of the Third Reich and the postwar period. In the Soviet Union, beginning with Perestroika, oral historians associated with the Memorial group carried out extensive interviews with survivors of the Stalin era.

Some critics of *Alltagsgeschichte* as it has been practiced in Germany have expressed “the fear that it will normalize the image of the Nazi regime by concentrating on the mundane, everyday aspects of life that continued relatively undisturbed.”⁵¹ This was certainly not the intention of the Niethammer team. One example of the critical function of oral history, Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1993),⁵² is based on interrogations in the 1960s by the state prosecutor’s office in Hamburg of 210 former members of the battalion who were involved in the mass executions of Jewish civilians in Poland. Browning’s study adds a new perspective to the history of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Until then the Holocaust had mostly been seen as a vast and complex administrative process, as Raoul Hilberg⁵³ had described it, carried out from their desks by bureaucrats like Adolf Eichmann, who for Hannah Arendt embodied “the banality of evil.”⁵⁴ Browning now focused on the role of the little men at the bottom of the hierarchy of the “machinery of destruction” who personally carried out the millions of executions. His account of Reserve Police Battalion 101 showed how middle-aged Hamburg policemen, many of working-class background, without overt anti-Semitic sentiments, were involved in the mass execu-

tions in Poland. “There is nothing inherent in the methodology of *Alltagsgeschichte*,” Browning notes, “that necessarily diminishes the centrality of the Holocaust in the history of Nazi Germany. On the contrary, I would argue, it is the best method for revealing how deeply mass murder was embedded in the lives of German personnel stationed in occupied eastern Europe.”⁵⁵

This leads us once more to the methodological questions raised by the practitioners of microhistory. Their key argument against social science approaches to history was that such history deprived the past of its qualitative aspects and left it without a human face. The question was how the human and the personal side of history could be recaptured. As we saw, Hans Medick found the model for such a history in the “thick description” of Clifford Geertz’s cultural anthropology. History, like anthropology, was an interpretive and not a systematic science. Cold analysis was replaced by an immediacy difficult to put into words. It appears to me, however, that the epistemology of thick description contains an unresolvable contradiction. It views the subject of its study as totally different from the observer. It rightly warns against projecting the observer’s thought categories onto the observed. Thick description should make the “other” appear to the observer in his/her “otherness.” This endows the subject of observation with an element of *objectivity* and makes it appear as an object embedded in reality. On the other hand, this anthropological approach challenged the objectivity of the world. It viewed the other as a text that needed to be read very much as one would read a literary text. A text, however, could be read in a variety of ways. The logical consequence of this approach should have been the elimination of the border between fact and fiction.

But in fact this was not the intent of the microhistorians. In their effort to restore the subjectivity and the individuality of the men and women they studied, they rejected the preoccupation of the social sciences with anonymous structures and processes, but they too in their work as historians assumed that they were confronting a real subject matter. In their effort to come closer to this subject matter, they were quite willing to use the tools of the social sciences. It is striking how, particularly in Germany, microhistorians relied on computer techniques, to be sure with

the intent not to establish broad generalizations but rather to discover exceptions to these generalizations. Although the Italians we discussed reflected an anthropological approach much more emphatically than their German colleagues and relied much less on the computer, they nevertheless rejected what they considered to be the methodological relativism of cultural anthropology in the Geertzian manner. In the final analysis microhistory appears not as a negation of a history of broader social contexts but as a supplement to it. The microhistorians have added a sense of concreteness to the study of the past. Using microhistorical methods, Christopher Browning in *Ordinary Men* thus did more than merely detail events within the Holocaust; through his focus on individual perpetrators he also endeavored to add a dimension to their behavior that would not be disclosed by broader generalizations. The Holocaust, Christopher Browning emphasized, is not an abstraction. Nor are the narratives of it, as Hayden White suggested, primarily constructs of the historian.⁵⁶ Rather, as Browning notes: “There is a constant dialectical interaction between what the historian brings to the research and how the research affects the historian.”⁵⁷