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CLUES, MARGINS, AND MONADS: THE MICRO–MACRO LINK IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

MATTI PELTONEN

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the new microhistory of the 1970s and 1980s in terms of the concept of *exceptional typical,* and contrasts the new microhistory to old microhistory, in which the relationship between micro and macro levels of phenomena was defined by means of the concepts of exceptionality and typicality. The focus of the essay is on Carlo Ginzburg's method of clues, Walter Benjamin's idea of monads, and Michel de Certeau's concept of margins. The new microhistory is also compared with methodological discussions in the social sciences. In the mid-1970s concepts like *the micro–macro link* or *the microfoundations of macrotheory* were introduced in sociology and economics. But these largely worked in terms of the concepts of typicality or exceptionality, and this has proved to be problematic. Only historians have developed concepts that escape these and the older definitions of the micro–macro relationship; indeed, the "new microhistory" can best be described in terms of the notion of "exceptional typical." The essay explores the meaning of this notion.

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE MICRO–MACRO LINK

Around 1975 a group of historical studies were published that were immediately recognized as representing something new. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975), E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), and Natalie Zemon Davis's *Culture and Society in Early Modern France* (1975) seemed to indicate a change in the paradigm of historiography. I call these studies "the new microhistory," though contemporary commentators first referred to them differently. In the 1980s the new microhistory was labeled "the return of narrative"—the title of an influential article by Lawrence Stone that certainly captured one aspect of the change, a new kind of historical rhetoric or narrative plotting—or resorting to an older rhetoric.[1] Stone saw a great deal in this change, including a more independent relationship with other social sciences and their ways of communicating results. However, what he totally missed was the theoretical program of the new microhistory—a program that was probably not shared by all microhistorians—namely their criticism of the standard textbook versions, both liberal and Marxist, of theories of modernization. In giving up the nation-state as the unit of

1. Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative," in his *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 74-96. First published in *Past & Present* 85 (1979).

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research, which was the building block and an important subject of modernization, microhistory aroused a lot of criticism, especially in German discussions of it.[2] The introduction of new subjects, groups, and persons previously considered marginal in historical studies also caused anxiety in many established quarters of academic historiography.[3]

In the early 1980s there was another wave of famous microhistories, this time theoretically more carefully argued and self-conscious in their approach. The most remarkable of them were Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) and Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power* (1984). Since then the flow of microhistories has been constant, though more variable in quality and without any really popular successes. The 1990s saw a number of important theoretical articles explaining the thinking behind the idea of microhistory.[4]

To me the most interesting aspect of the new microhistory is methodological. In these studies historians specify the micro–macro relation in new ways that enrich the methodological arsenal of all social scientists. Although they do not always discuss the micro–macro link explicitly, microhistorical studies implicitly include new ideas about it. The importance of the methodological side of the new microhistory becomes more obvious if we compare it to discussions in the social sciences. Economists started to discuss the "microfoundations of macrotheory" in the late 1970s, and sociologists the "micro–macro-link" in the next decade. But as we shall see, these discussions have shown problems in the way micro–macro link has been conceived (by means of the concept "typicality" or "exceptionality"). It is the new microhistorians whose approach is best captured by the concept "exceptional typical" that have shown a way out of these problems.[5]

2. See, for instance, the conference report edited by Wilfried Schulze, which includes contributions for and against microhistory, *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie: Eine Diskussion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994). As paradigmatic examples of modernization theory in the field of historical studies, see Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965), and W. W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

3. See, for instance, the reactions of Bernard Bailyn, Dominick LaCapra, or Charles Tilly. Bernard Bailyn, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982), 1-24; Dominick LaCapra, *History & Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Charles Tilly, "The Old New Social History and the New Old Social History," *Review* 7 (1984), 363-406.

4. Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1991), 93-113; Giovanni Levi, "Comportements, ressources, procès: avant la 'révolution' de la consommation," in *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 187-207; Giovanni Levi, "The Origins of the Modern State and the Microhistorical Perspective," in *Mikrogeschichte, Makrogeschichte: komplementär oder inkommensurabel?*, ed. Jürgen Schlumbohm (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), 53-82; Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), 10-35; Edward Muir, "Observing Trifles," *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), vii-xxviii; Jacques Revel, "Microanalysis and the Construction of the Social," *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (New York: New Press, 1995), 493-501.

5. The term "exceptional normal" or "exceptional typical" was first introduced by the Italian historian Edoardo Grendi.

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II. THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL ASPECTS OF THE MICRO–MACRO LINK

The term *microhistory* came with an Italian accent, in articles by Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg. Ginzburg has described how he, Levi, and some of their colleagues encountered the expression "microhistory" and how it was first used as a collective label for a series of historical studies. Ginzburg's version of microhistory was first advocated in his splendid article "Clues."[6] Ginzburg drew a very dramatic picture, which was also noticeable in his preface to *The Cheese and the Worms,* of the difference between history and other social sciences. For Ginzburg, a distinguishing feature of historical study lies in its concrete nature, its attention to specific or singular phenomena. Levi's approach was similar but more open to the social sciences; he did not share all of Ginzburg's methodological arguments, for instance those concerning the uselessness of quantitative methods and large databases. Indeed, he proposed instead a more ambitious use of mathematical tools.

The important common feature of the new microhistory advocated by Ginzburg and Levi is the "method of clues." By this they mean starting an investigation from something that does not quite fit, something odd that needs to be explained. This peculiar event or phenomenon is taken as a sign of a larger, but hidden or unknown, structure. A strange detail is made to represent a wider totality. In Levi's words:

> The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved. . . . Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions and as experiments rather than examples.[7]

I call this first feature of microhistory, the relationship of a particular or peculiar event to a larger context, its temporal aspect. By choosing this expression I am not inventing something new but only following the example of many social sciences where it is natural to see the relationship between micro and macro levels of society as temporal.[8] This aspect of the microhistorical approach is easily lost if one, for instance, sees it as a representative of some kind of postmodernist historiography celebrating discontinuity.

The second common feature in Levi's and Ginzburg's version of microhistory is the stress given to the spatial nature of the micro–macro link, a nature that brings together in a single event or object the deeper, inner structural elements of a larger social whole. The definition given by Roger Chartier of microhistory captures this aspect neatly: "It is on this reduced scale, and probably only on this

6. Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce,* ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 81-118.

7. Levi, "On Microhistory," 97-98.

8. For a more thorough treatment of this proposition, see Matti Peltonen, "Carlo Ginzburg and the New Microhistory," *Suomen Antropologi* 20 (1995), 2-12.

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scale, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on the one hand, and social affiliations on another."[9] This definition has been cited approvingly by both Levi and Ginzburg.[10] Unfortunately, many commentators have noticed only the spatial aspect of microhistorical thinking, and perhaps for this reason have given a one-sided description of it.

Many micro historians can be criticized for not paying enough attention to the temporal quality of the micro level. It is, however, interesting to read famous microhistories from the temporal point of view. In this respect the work of Ginzburg is instructive. It is typical of much of his work in that it is based on an enormous temporal tension. I refer especially to his works *The Night Battles*, *The Cheese and the Worms,* and *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. In all these works the most interesting aspect, the result Ginzburg wants to communicate to his readers, is created by the collision of an exceptional event with the long historical structure of popular culture. This special moment brings into the open structures whose importance is much more difficult, if not impossible, to see in other periods. Micro historians are actually trying to discover very big things with their microscopes and magnifying lenses. This aspect of the microhistorical enterprise is not adequately illustrated by the spatial metaphor describing the focusing of attention on small areas.

The Cheese and the Worms is the best example of Ginzburg's narrative strategy, where the articulation of the long-term structures with events of shorter duration creates exciting conflicts that the historian highlights in his text. For many professionals this temporal tension raises objections. It is the autonomous existence of the long-term structure of popular culture that is difficult to accept and understand. They wonder how anyone can believe that such long-term, but almost hidden, structures exist, if their existence is not amply and independently ascertained and documented. How can anyone speak for the autonomous existence of a radical peasant culture if it is at the same time influenced by the elite culture dominating the same society?[11] For instance, Dominick LaCapra finds it impossible to admit even in principle that the miller Menocchio's worldview could have been based on old peasant culture, because he fears that doing this would somehow "reinforce hegemonic relations in professional historiography." If popular culture is also an important level of culture, then those who study it are also doing important work in intellectual history, which would, according to LaCapra, constitute "a bizarre and vicious paradox whereby a vicarious relation to the oppressed of the past serves as a pretext for contemporary pretensions to dominance."[12] I quote these arguments to indicate how much recent discussions in historiography are influenced by considerations of academic prestige.

9. Roger Chartier, "Intellectual History or Sociocultural History?," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives,* ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 32.

10. Levi, "On Microhistory," 95; Ginzburg, "Microhistory," 22.

11. LaCapra, *History & Criticism*, 45-69.

12. *Ibid.*, 69.

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I propose we revisit the concept of micro in microhistory. What actually is micro in *The Cheese and the Worms*? Is it the person of the miller Menocchio, as is so commonly assumed, or is it as the title of the book instructs us to observe, the strange element in the interrogation by the Inquisition of this humble peasant? Or what is micro in *The Return of Martin Guerre*? Is it Martin himself, or is it the village where he lived and married Bertrande de Rols? Or is the micro element of this story the adventure shared by Bertrande and Pansette, which finally led to the hanging of the adventurous peasant lad who took the place of the legitimate husband? It seems to me that the perfectly legitimate attention to the reduction of the scale of observation in microhistorical studies has somehow misled readers to interpret the microelement in a conventional manner, and individuals or small places like villages are automatically assumed to represent the microelement discussed. In fact, these conventional readings have not exhausted the fruits of microhistorical methodology, but have left an important aspect of it unrecognized. In the words of Giovanni Levi the problem could be stated in the following way: "microhistory cannot be defined in relation to the micro-dimension of its subject-matter."[13]

III. OTHER MICROHISTORIES: MICHEL DE CERTEAU

The approach advocated by Ginzburg and Levi is only one way to define the idea of "new microhistory." It is interesting to compare it with other conceptions of microhistory. Consider the approach practiced by the French historian Michel de Certeau. He is not very often considered in this connection, but he deserves attention not just as a practitioner of microhistory, but also as one of the rare historians who have produced interesting and influential methodological contributions. Here I am thinking especially of his monograph *The Writing of History* and its central article "The Historiographical Operation" (1974).[14] De Certeau's microhistorical monograph *La Possession du Loudun* (1970) can be seen to belong to the first wave of new microhistory.[15]

In *La Possession du Loudun* de Certeau reveals his interest in marginal or borderline phenomena.[16] In the same manner as Ginzburg in his *Il benandanti* (1966), de Certeau also took seriously the experiences of those marginal people who were previously dismissed in studies of witch trials or the witch-craze as "hysterical women in a harsh rural world or in artificial communities," or "nocturnal experiences of neurotic or sexually frustrated women."[17] He analyzed the

13. Levi, "On Microhistory," 93.

14. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History,* transl. Tom Conley [1975] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

15. It is interesting to notice that one of the most influential reviews of de Certeau's monograph was written by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Le diable archiviste," republished later in his *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 404-407.

16. There is now an English translation of de Certeau's work by Michael B. Smith, *The Possession at Loudun* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

17. The characterizations of persons being excluded from the study of witch-crazes comes from H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1984), 102, and Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (London: Paladin, 1976), 237.

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description of possession of seventeen Ursuline nuns and ten other females in the town of Loudun in the 1630s. This exciting event or theater, as de Certeau calls it, lasted for almost ten years in that small provincial town, and turned it into a tourist attraction that was visited from all over France and even from neighboring countries. The chain of events included the burning at the stake of the priest of the town, Urbain Grandier, who was accused of causing the possession of these poor women by evil spirits. Another strange twist in the story was the curing of the nuns by the famous Jesuit mystic Joseph Surin, who seems to have lived the rest of his life tormented by the same evil spirits from which he rescued the possessed nuns. Soon after this miraculous curing operation another miracle happened: the mother superior of the Ursuline convent in Loudun, mother Jeanne des Anges, discovered every now and then on her arm the texts IOSEPH and MARIA. With this miracle she toured the whole of France and let people kiss her hand. Even the king saw her twice on tour.

De Certeau raised two larger points on account of these extreme experiences. The first one concerns the more local interpretations of the events at Loudun. He claimed that the possessions and other religious experiences of the 1630s were a symptom of the insecurity many people suffered due to big changes in the society at the time. The events at Loudun could be seen both as a sign and an important part of a more common social change from the older religious worldview to an explicitly political scene.[18] He did not base this idea solely on the Loudun case, but took account of several similar events, in fact a wave of possessions in early seventeenth-century France. So there is in de Certeau's microhistory a strong tendency to make conclusions concerning the macro level.

De Certeau also assessed, as I have already indicated, the religious experiences of common people in the early seventeenth century in a different manner than was usual in historical studies in the 1960s and 1970s. He didn't judge them as superstitions or erroneous thinking, but tried to discover some logic, even in the answers given by possessed women in the middle of a fit.[19] He saw in the mystical experience a reaction against the appropriation of truth by the clerics. "The illuminations of the illiterate, the experiences of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child" also gave access to knowledge and competence in matters of faith to the ignorant.[20] In this respect de Certeau's ideas come close to the "history from below" of the British social historians George Rudé and E. P. Thompson with their concepts such as "the moral economy of the crowd" or "the weapons of the weak."[21]

18. Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other* (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity Press, 1995), 79.

19. Michel de Certeau, "Discourse Disturbed: The Sorcerer's Speech," in *The Writing of History,* 244-268.

20. Roger Chartier, "Michel de Certeau: History, or Knowledge of the Other," in Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, transl. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 46.

21. E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1991), 185-351.

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De Certeau best presents the marginal approach in his methodological article "The Historiographical Operation." His views are developed in opposition to a provocation by Paul Veyne in his monograph *Writing History*.[22] His idea is not that history opposes the models created in social-scientific research, but that history analyzes the deviations from these models.[23] "Significant" or "exceptional details" receive their importance when compared to hegemonic models of social life.[24] De Certeau's concept "significant deviation" is not actually very far from the "exceptional normal" invented by the Italian microhistorians.

De Certeau refers to Fernand Braudel when introducing the idea of marginal areas and borderline phenomena as epistemologically fruitful subjects of study. The point is that these clear-cut and easy-to-handle phenomena are somehow more revealing and less complicated to analyze than areas that can be assessed as more central. Marginal areas have clear relationships with their "mother areas" or central places; there is continuity among them by definition. In this regard Braudel spoke about the "microelements of civilization."[25]

Among the better-known microhistories, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* comes nearest to the kind of microhistory that de Certeau advocated. There is no doubt that Montaillou was in many respects—geographically, climatically, and socially—a marginal example of French peasant society at the beginning of the fourteenth century. But the village of Montaillou belonged at the same time to several larger communities, according to Ladurie. The inhabitants of the village were Catholics or Cathars, they spoke Occitan and followed many Occitan traditions. They were also, according to Ladurie, representatives of Chayanovian peasant households, which populated "the West before Adam Smith."[26]

There is, however, a clear difference between the approaches of de Certeau and Ladurie. For de Certeau the movement from micro to macro is clear; for Ladurie the macro level is only implicit in the concepts used in his book. From the viewpoint of de Certeau, Ladurie's work is in a way incomplete.

IV. OTHER MICROHISTORIES: WALTER BENJAMIN

The German intellectual Walter Benjamin had an interesting approach to historical study, although he is currently better known as a literary critic and philosopher. Benjamin's image as a historian was reinforced in 1981 when his *Das Passagen-Werk* was finally published.[27] This unfinished manuscript is one of the

22. Paul Veyne, *Writing History. Essay on Epistemology*, transl. Mina Moore-Renvolucri [1971] (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

23. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 77.

24. Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau*, 35-36.

25. Fernand Braudel, *On History*, transl. Sarah Matthews [1969] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 203.

26. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294–1324*, transl. Barbara Bray (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1980), 354.

27. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 [1981] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991); English translation: *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

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most frequently discussed texts in recent times. Unfortunately, Benjamin is seen more as a philosopher of history than as a historian.[28] I think Susan Buck-Morss was right, however, when she wrote that Benjamin was not so much a philosopher of history as a maker of history into philosophy.[29] Although the manuscript is more in the nature of research notes, the concept of the planned book seems to be such that these notes—which are not just notes, but notes that have been worked on and occasionally commented on extensively; and some of them are not notes at all, but Benjamin's reflection on his method or subject—are in fact the manuscript of the book.

Benjamin's keen sense of the importance of details is usually recognized as a fundamental characteristic of both his personality and methodology. Ernst Bloch, for instance, stressed Benjamin's interest in the peripheral, praising his "unique gaze for the significant detail" and remarking that this sensitivity to the specific was totally lacking in the thinking of Lukács, for instance. As Bloch put it, "Benjamin had an incomparable micrological-philological sense for this sort of detail, for this sort of significant periphera, for this sort of meaningful incidental sign."[30]

Jean Selz, Benjamin's French friend and translator, has also reminded us that "from a small observation based on a tiny detail, his thought always went very far, feeding the conversations with his most personal opinions."[31] Another French friend and translator, Pierre Missac, also described Benjamin's approach as though he was giving a definition of "new microhistory." In Missac's opinion Benjamin found the best opportunities for his talents in small dimensions. Benjamin set for the historian and the sociologist the task of finding in insignificant facts and events the seed for "ambitious reconstructive interpretations."[32] Benjamin seems to ascertain this himself by writing in the epistemological part of the *Passagen-Werk* manuscript that what other people see as deviation from the right course are to him guideposts. "What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course."[33]

Benjamin was writing in the 1930s about Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century. By this cryptic expression Benjamin wanted to say that Paris in the nineteenth century was much more than just the capital of France. He saw the arcades of Paris as an *ur*-phenomenon of modernity, as a collage of pictures expressing the unconscious or dream world of the early Industrial Age. Benjamin saw the

28. The exception is Hans Medick, who has mentioned "Walter Benjamins, Ernst Blochs und Theodor Adornos emphatische und philosophish-spekulativ überhöhte Herausgebung des Einzelnen, Besonderen und Konkreten in der Geschichte." Hans Medick, "Mikro-Histoire," in *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Histoire*, ed. Schulze, 49.

29. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 55.

30. *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections,* ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 340.

31. Jean Selz, "Benjamin in Ibiza," in *ibid.*, 356.

32. Pierre Missac; *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, transl. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,), 44.

33. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456.

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early commercial life in the Parisian arcades as a monad reflecting the world in the city in a comprehensive way. The arcades were miniatures of the world around them.

The basic ideas concerning this kind of approach to history were already evident in his unsuccessful dissertation in 1928. In its methodologico-critical preface Benjamin referred to the seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz and his concept of the monad. "The idea is a monad—that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world."[34] In the more comprehensive, but unfortunately quite fragmented, epistemological part of the Paris manuscript Benjamin continues his monadological thinking. He is interested in "only the trivia, the trash"; for him "history breaks down into images, not into stories" and the issue is to "detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment."[35] Although Benjamin is the earliest of my microhistorical exemplars, his methodological reflections were, in spite of the unfinished condition of his manuscript, the most extensive.

A well-known contribution often discussed in the context of microhistorical research is Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1972). Although Geertz does not mention Walter Benjamin, the monadological idea of the micro–macro link is clear in his text. In this article Geertz reads the institution of the Balinese cockfight as a "monadic encounter of everyday life," similar to any other instance discussed in similar studies. Furthermore, the example of the Balinese cockfight also gives proof that "societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations."[36]

Another monadological example is Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*, one of most famous studies in twentieth-century literary history. In this study Auerbach uses a technique that is quite similar to those of Benjamin or Geertz. He takes a fragment from a great canonical Western novel, and by analyzing this miniature sample tries to uncover all that is essential in its approach to representing the world. In his own words "in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed."[37]

34. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* transl. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977), 48.

35. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460, 461, and 476. In the text, however, I use an older and more precise translation of this part of Benjamin's manuscript: Walter Benjamin, "N [Re The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," transl. Leigh Hafray and Richard Sieburth, in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History,* ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47, 67, and 48.

36. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-453.

37. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 547. In their recent methodological manifesto *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) literary historians Catherine Gallagher and Stephen J. Greenblatt refer both to the example of Clifford Geertz and the method of Eric Auerbach as sources of inspiration for the school of new historicism in literary criticism. There is, accordingly, a reluctance to elaborate the micro–macro link in this interesting work. In reference to Greenblatt's earlier work this element in his thinking has been recently criticized by Christopher Prendergast, *The Triangle of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 47-62.

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Leibniz seems to have thought that the world consists of monads; everything or everybody reflects the structure of the world. Auerbach and Geertz follow Leibniz in this respect. But Benjamin is not so democratic: he thought that only certain very expressive entities can be used effectively as miniatures of the surrounding world. He liked to point out the difficulty of defining meaningful monads: They have to be blasted out of the continuity of history before their structure becomes obvious.[38]

V. "EXCEPTIONALITY" AND "TYPICALITY" VERSUS "EXCEPTIONAL TYPICAL"

The new microhistory has frequently been described as the study of the *typical exception*. This is one answer to the problem of how historians study the micro–macro link, an answer given to critics suspicious of the whole idea of microhistory. The critics of microhistory seem to be convinced that the only possible links between micro and macro are exceptionality (famous persons or important events) and typicality (individuals or events that represent a larger group).

The notions of typicality and exceptionality are often found in other social sciences as well. In economics, for instance, they are used to define the microfoundations of macroeconomic theory. The American economist Robert Solow has recently expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea that the micro-actors of economic processes are essentially homogeneous such that by understanding one of them economists can understand them all. When commenting on new models of monopolistic competition Solow wrote:

> In their desire to insist that the only valid macro model is the exact aggregation of a micro model, the protagonists of the newer school have been led to favor two very narrow basic presumptions. The first of them is a bias in favour of models populated by a single representative agent who lives forever, or perhaps by a large number of identical immortal agents. That device certainly solves the aggregation problem neatly, but at the cost of ignoring every problem that arises from the heterogeneity of households and firms, and that means, arguably, ignoring nearly everything that is interesting in macroeconomics.[39]

Methodological discussion in sociology has also been critical of micro-sociology for the same reason. If the macro level is defined only by referring to its supposed micro elements, a model is thought to be either trivial or reductionist. Several researchers have expressed the idea that the micro–macro link does not refer to the agent–structure or individual–society link at all. As Charles Lemert put it:

> The equation of micro with individual is extremely misleading, as, indeed, is the attempt to find any specific size correlation with the micro/macro difference. There can be no

38. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474.

39. The other fatal assumption Solow refers to is the assumption of perfect competition, which is still common even in models trying to imitate the conditions of imperfect competition. Robert Solow, *Monopolistic Competition and Macroeconomic Theory* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10.

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empirical references for micro and macro as such. They are analytic contrasts, suggesting emergent levels within empirical units, not antagonistic empirical units themselves.[40]

Nicos Mouzelis seems to agree fully with this, and indeed develops it:

In so far as micro is not linked to agency nor macro to structure, the micro–macro distinction is a very useful one. Whether we are dealing with actors/interactions or institutional structures, macro refers to cases where the impact of institutionalized rules (when instantiated) or actors' practices stretch widely in time and space; micro applies where this impact is very limited. . . . The micro–macro distinction has the character of "more or less" rather than of "either/or."[41]

Mouzelis comes close to the ideas expressed by new microhistorians, although he seems to be unaware of the world beyond sociological theory. His insistence on taking into account the hierarchies of social life is also familiar from critical economists' ideas about the microfoundations of macrotheory. These ideas seem to unite many of the microhistorical ideas of the 1990s with the most critical representatives of other social sciences.[42] The critical voices in the sociological literature of the micro–macro link are not just unhappy about the often trivial or at least reductive nature of how macro phenomena are supposed to consist of their microelements. The more radical critique is that it is not justifiable to see the individual as a micro entity at all.

In new microhistory the link between micro and macro levels is not a simple reduction or aggregation. The movement from one level or sphere to another is qualitative, and generates new information. It could also be called a double bind. By referring to the micro–macro link in microhistorical thinking as a double bind, I mean that the researcher crosses over boundaries twice. In the case of typicality or exceptionality the movement from one level to another does not generate new information. On the other hand these more simple micro–macro links can be formalized and handled mathematically, which is often regarded as very important.

Take for instance the concept of the clue as a micro–macro relation. On the one hand a clue is something that does not quite fit in with its immediate surroundings, something that seems odd or out of place. It is in certain respects discontinuous with its environment. On the other hand a clue leads thought to somewhere else, reveals connections, exposes some secret or crime. So there is continuity, too, which is equally important. Similarly a marginal or extreme case is in some respects typical of a larger area or a group, but in its extremeness differs from the typical case in significant ways. Again we have to define the marginal or extreme twice to capture its precise nature. If the relationship between micro and macro is conceived as a monad, for instance the way Benjamin introduced the arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, the double bind also becomes visible. Although the arcades were a remarkable phenomenon of their own, they also reflected the peculiar features of the time in a comprehensive way.

40. Charles Lemert, *Sociology: After the Crisis* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 163.

41. Nicos Mouzelis, *Sociological Theory: What Went Wrong? Diagnosis and Remedies* (London: Routledge, 1995), 155.

42. Levi, "On Microhistory"; Ginzburg, "Microhistory."

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Walter Benjamin defined the double movement between micro and macro—without, of course, using these concepts—when he wrote about the blasting out of the monad from the continuity of history. Using his poetic imagery he referred to the moment of waking up, the ending of sleep and beginning of another type of consciousness. Awakening can also be at the same time remembering, becoming aware of something forgotten and forming a new historical continuity.[43] This is expressed in his paradoxical criticism of the epistemology of historicism: "In order for a past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them."[44] Continuity is based on discontinuity.

It is the double-bind character of the concept "exceptional typical" or "exceptional normal" that upsets some contemporary historians who at first have difficulty accepting a description of past phenomena that does not treat these phenomena as homogeneous. Many historians with a more conservative view of their profession express their dissatisfaction with not having a representative or important (meaning already known and famous) case study.[45] Others can practice the microhistorical approach in their own work without realizing it—see for instance Richard J. Evans's monograph on *Death in Hamburg* (1987)—and severely criticize microhistorical work by other historians.[46] It is also interesting to notice that some types of microhistorical work, for instance demographic micro studies, do not upset anybody no matter how obscure and untypical the communities studied are.[47]

VI. CONCLUSION

Compared to the discussions of the micro–macro link in the social sciences, there are interesting peculiarities in the historical micro perspective. In the social sciences the methodological discussion takes as its starting point the conceptualizing of the micro–macro link. The aim of the methodological discussion is to think through this connection or aggregation. In the social sciences there are few

43 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 388-392, 462-475.

44. *Ibid.*, 470.

45. John H. Elliott, *National and Comparative History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). It is interesting to observe that even such a dedicated opponent of microhistory as Elliott proposes a microhistorical research strategy that comes close to Braudel's and de Certeau's idea of marginal areas or events as epistemologically critical. See Elliott, *National and Comparative History*, 27, where he says that "But in so far as colonies do tend to express and preserve metropolitan customs and values in a distilled and often rarefied form, a comparative study of colonial societies offers another, and potentially promising, way of approaching the question of distinctive collective identities and identity formations."

46. Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830–1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). "When I began, in the 1980s, researching the Hamburg cholera epidemic of 1892, it was because I was attracted by the immense amount of source material this major disaster generated, which revealed the structures and dynamics of everyday life, social inequality, politics and administration, mentalities and behavior, in a major European city. These are precisely the fine details which remain concealed from the historian's view in more normal times." For Evans's criticism of microhistory, see his *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997), 144.

47. Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History* (Hanover, N. H.: Montgomery Endowment, Dartmouth College, 1994), 31.

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counterparts to concepts like clues, margins, and monads. Perhaps some research ideas come close to them, but these ideas are then surprisingly more concrete than they are in historical research (for instance, the idea of considering suicides as an indicator of the health of a society or community, a notion already suggested by Émile Durkheim.[48])

Furthermore, many of the concepts used in the social-scientific discussion of the connection of micro and macro levels seem to indicate that a third concept is needed. Words like "link," "nexus," or "foundation" indicate the materiality of the connection as space (or some third element existing between these levels). The fact that the nature of this third partner is not defined gives the impression of abstractness and generality.

The micro perspective in historiography is more methodologically oriented, and concentrates on how historical studies are argued, whereas social scientists discuss theories of society. The genuine contribution of history lies in what I have termed—following the Italian historian Edoardo Grendi—the "exceptional typical," which actually postulates a double bind between the micro and macro levels or phenomena. By focusing on clues, margins, and monads historians show the way in concrete detail how actual entities, personal experiences, or events can relate the micro with the macro.

It is interesting to notice how several social sciences, history included, began at the same time to formulate their own concepts for analyzing the connection between micro and macro phenomena. Seeing this parallel development in methodological questions gives something to all of them, because the conceptualizations these questions contain have up to now been so different. This situation also shows that historical study is, at least in methodological questions, an independent and original mode of research. Comparison with the other social sciences can also give new insight into what the coming of the new microhistory meant. It was not just the "revival of narrative" or the "revival of the history of mentalities," although that was partly the case. I have tried to show in this article that from the methodological point of view it meant new ways of describing and analyzing the micro–macro link.

University of Helsinki
Finland

48. Birgitta Odén, *Leda vid livet: Fyra mikrohistoriska essäer om självmordets historia* (Lund: Historiska Media, 1998), 7.

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