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Trivellato, Francesca

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## Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?

Francesca Trivellato

In the late 1970s and 80s, particularly after the appearance of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) and Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power* (1985), Italian microhistory shook the ground of established historiographical paradigms and practices. Since then, as Anthony Grafton put it, "Microhistories have captivated readers, won places on syllabi, been translated into many languages – and enraged and delighted their [the authors'] fellow professionals" (2006, 62). Are the questions that propelled Italian microhistory still significant or have they lost impetus? How has the meaning of microhistory changed over the past thirty years? And what can this approach contribute nowadays, when 'globalization' and 'global' are the dominant keywords in the humanities and the social sciences – keywords that we hardly associate with anything micro?

In what follows, I wish to put forth two arguments. I suggest that the potential of a microhistorical approach for global history remains underexploited. Since the 1980s, the encounter between Italian microhistory and global history has been confined primarily to the narrative form. A host of studies of individuals whose lives traversed multiple linguistic, political, and religious boundaries has enjoyed considerable success among scholars and the broad public alike. These are predicated on the idea that a micro- and biographical scale can best portray the entanglement of cultural traditions produced by the growing contacts and clashes between different societies that followed the sixteenth-century European geographical expansion. They also reflect a greater comfort among historians and the general reader, perhaps most pronounced in Anglophone countries, with narration rather than social scientific analysis. However compelling, many of these studies fall short of the original methodological ambitions of Italian microhistorians. By revisiting some of those original ambitions, I propose other ways for intersecting microhistory and global history.

I also wish to tackle a second issue. In their historiographical reflections and empirical studies, Italian microhistorians repeatedly grappled with the challenge of how to conceive of the relationship between micro- and macro-scales of analysis. But they never outlined a uniform and coherent theory. The persistent friction between micro- and macro-analysis raises questions about the degree of generalization that can be drawn from single case-studies and, ultimately, about the scientific status of history as a discipline.<sup>1</sup> To provide such an outline is well beyond the scope of this essay. I simply posit that Italian microhistorians' reflections on the relationship between micro and macro can instill a healthy dose of critical self-reflexivity into the practice of global history. No matter how much global historians set out to challenge earlier Eurocentric and teleological narratives, they sometimes reproduce generalizations closely indebted to those very narratives, especially when their accounts unfold on the macro-scale. The

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<sup>1</sup> Ginzburg's essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" (1986, esp. 177-80; 1989a, esp. 112-15) muses on these questions and their relation to the micro scale. For a sympathetic but frank account of Italian microhistorians' struggle to reconcile the micro and macro-scales, see Allegra (2009 and 2011).

synchronic approach that accompanies the combination of micro- and macro-analysis counterbalances this tendency. At its best, microhistory can also foster fresh and illuminating comparisons.

## I.

Even those who are not seduced by it recognize that today we face a ‘global turn’ in the practice of historical writing – particularly, though not exclusively, in the field of European history. The adjective ‘global’ is everywhere – in book and essay titles, in academic job advertisements and calls for papers, in the institutional and disciplinary emergence of ‘the global humanities.’ What global history means and whether it is even possible to write it are much-debated questions. In a conventional rendition (Crossley 2008), global history is a rejuvenation of ancient heroic attempts to write universal history as it has been conceived across the centuries and in multiple civilizations by authors as diverse as Herodotus, ‘Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Husayn al-Mas’udi (895-957), Rashid al-Din (1247-1318), and Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975).<sup>2</sup> But not all recent works that are bracketed under this rubric aspire to write a universal history, no matter how ecumenical. As several articles in *The Journal of Global History* testify, for example, the label applies as often to studies that have a regional rather than world-wide scope or that focus on select phenomena spanning vast distances across political, religious, and linguistic borders. Scholars use alternating terminology, and it is not always clear what they mean by it exactly. How different – if at all – is global history from world history? Was there a *mondialisation* (Gruzinski 2004) before the range of experiences that we commonly denote by the term ‘globalization’? Can we speak of ‘transnational’ phenomena before the rise of the nation-state? The list of questions could multiply. I choose not to engage with them at length here, not because they are unimportant, but because they would distract me from the principal objectives of this essay.

In spite of the heterogeneity of designations and methodologies, contributions that style themselves as global history for the most part adopt a macro-scale of analysis. They examine demographic catastrophes, forced and voluntary large-scale migrations, ecological disasters, military invasions, and technological breakthroughs. They offer structural comparisons between continents, empires, and oceans. They also emphasize ruptures and transformations over the long run. Donald Yerxa thus opts for “the inelegant term *macrohistory* to describe this growing body of literature, which includes some types of world history, global history, world-system analysis, macrosociology, comparative civilizational analysis, geopolitics, ‘Big History,’ and large-scale world-historical investigations from a variety of perspectives” (2009, 1). An eclectic definition of this sort seems appropriate. But we ought to pause over Yerxa’s corollary statement, according to which “Macrohistory, simply put, is the scale of history most relevant when we think about how the issues now facing humanity as a whole came into being” (ibid., 5). While there is a productive advantage in accepting the term *macrohistory* to refer to a multiplicity of current approaches and subfields, Yerxa’s conclusion betrays an apparent

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<sup>2</sup> See also O’Brien (2006).

(if perhaps unintentional) belief in the self-evident primacy of macrohistory in current scholarly debates – a belief which needs to be scrutinized further. Have global themes created a new orthodoxy? Is a macro-scale analysis always the best way to grapple with them? Can a micro-scale be a suitable alternative or at least a helpful complement to it? Or, simply put, is there a future for microhistory in the face of the global turn? And if there is, what does it look like?

## II.

To begin to address these questions, we ought briefly to consider the aims that Italian microhistorians set for themselves, as well as the actual impact of their works. By everyone's account, Italian microhistorians never amounted to a unified school of thought.<sup>3</sup> However, they were originally a relatively small group of scholars in close contact with each other, whose most prominent members were Edoardo Grendi, Ginzburg, Levi, and Carlo Poni. The academic journal *Quaderni Storici* (particularly between 1976 and 1990) and the book series "Microstorie" (published by Giulio Einaudi from 1981 to 1991) were their primary publication venues.<sup>4</sup> In highlighting the Italian character of this circle, Grendi noted the existence of a common "style" marked by a strong theoretical awareness and by a rejection of idealism in philosophy, ideological dualism in politics, as well as rhetorical pomposity and grand syntheses in historical writing (1994, 539). Despite their divergent inclinations, Italian microhistorians also stood united in setting themselves apart from practitioners of local history, narrative history, the French *histoire de la vie privée*, and the German *Alltagsgeschichte*. The latter two fields, in particular, labored to inject new perspectives into the rising tide of social history, including the study of women, emotions, and acts of resistance. Italian microhistorians shared with French and German counterparts the conviction that to reveal phenomena obscured by received wisdom would invalidate the teleology of grand narratives. But they strove less to recover the everyday life of ordinary people than to employ the micro-scale of analysis in order to test the validity of macro-scale explanatory paradigms. Their principal targets were the crude Marxism of left-leaning social historians, the Braudelian *longue durée*, and the approach to quantitative history that the *Annales* school derived from it, as well as the influence that socio-cultural functionalism in anthropology and modernization theory in politics and economics exerted on historiography.

Inspired by anthropological rather than sociological models, Italian microhistorians were drawn to idiosyncratic figures and phenomena rather than to ordinary people and consistent patterns. In an often quoted aphorism that remains as captivating as it is enigmatic, Grendi spoke of the need to focus on "the exceptional normal," that is, on

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<sup>3</sup> Statements by Levi (1991, 91, 111), Ginzburg (1993, 34), Grendi (1994, 540), and Revel (1996a, 16) denying the existence of a microhistorical canon are confirmed by the plurality of themes and approaches explored by these very scholars and those whom they inspired.

<sup>4</sup> Under Ginzburg and Levi's editorship, twenty-three titles were published in the series "Microstorie," including both original work by Italian scholars and translations of studies by foreign historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and E.P. Thompson.

extra-ordinary documents that – if subjected to the proper micro-analytical reading – could nonetheless illuminate broad trends.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis here, as in Ginzburg’s notion of *spie*, or “clues” in English (1986), is on the encounter with primary sources that at first sight contain details that are incongruent with standard narratives. From an apparently exceptional document, a historian can extrapolate typical and relevant indicators, not just exceptional stories. Thus, the eccentric sixteenth-century Friulian miller Domenico Scandella, better known by his nickname, Menocchio, became the vehicle through which Ginzburg (1976) repudiated the rigid separation between elite and popular culture, which the invention of the printing press and the Counter Reformation were thought to have intensified. Building on the biography of a dubious exorcist, Levi (1985) showed that land prices in seventeenth-century Piedmont were neither controlled by rigid price-lists set by corporate or sovereign authorities nor governed by supply and demand as traditionally defined; rather, they responded to a deeply local logic in which supply and demand were compounded by the effects of kinship relations, social stratification, credit and charity, as well as the geographical position of the parcels of land themselves (which affected economies of scale). Only a microhistorical study could uncover the impact of all these factors. Its implications, Levi maintained, transcended the local and should prompt us to revisit commonplace notions about how European land markets worked in the early modern period.

In its most inspiring versions, microhistory applied the micro-scale of analysis to any object of inquiry (whether a village or a city, for example) but also combined micro- and macro-scales, rather than favoring the micro as an article of faith (Levi 1991, 95-97, 107; Revel 1995, 496 and 1996a, 19-20).<sup>6</sup> In keeping with this ideal, what today we would call global connections are hinted at here and there. Levi took notice that “even the apparently minutest action of, say, somebody going to buy a loaf of bread, actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world’s grain markets” (Levi 1991, 96). Neither he nor other microhistorians, however, have bequeathed to us a full account of how to recapture this interrelationship of the local and the global. Some of their followers have sought to resolve the conundrum via recourse to narrative devices – as most historians do. I will return to this point below. But first, we ought to acknowledge what sets micro- and macrohistory apart.

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<sup>5</sup> For Grendi “il documento eccezionale può risultare eccezionalmente ‘normale,’ appunto perché rilevante” (1977, 512; an exceptional document can turn out to be exceptionally ‘normal,’ precisely because of its relevance; my translation). In editing some of Grendi’s essays, Osvaldo Raggio and Angelo Torre refer to the one in which this passage appears as “il testo fondativo della microstoria” (Grendi 2004, 14n28; microhistory’s foundational text; my translation).

<sup>6</sup> Maurizio Gribaudi (1996) points out that the micro- and macro-scales are not inherently incompatible, but that historians and social scientists favoring the micro-perspective depict social and institutional systems as open to individual manipulations and in constant transformation, while those favoring the macro-perspective adopt a more evolutionary image in which forces that transcend the individual produce historical change.

### III.

At the risk of being overly schematic, we can identify a short list of features that mark the distance between the two types of analysis. To begin with, microhistory relies on an intensive use of primary sources (especially court records, autobiographies, and notarial documents) while macrohistory draws abundantly, if not exclusively, on secondary sources (ideally, but not always, written in multiple languages). Second, macrohistory tends to unfold over many centuries, if not millennia, and often proceeds at considerable speed. Instead microhistory takes a synchronic approach by choice and by necessity – it is more interested in (and more suited to) uncovering the interconnection between multiple phenomena than identifying causal processes of change over time. Thirdly, the protagonists of Italian microhistorical studies are for the most part European white men, though often from the rural poor and middling sorts, while most macrohistory seeks to put Europe in a comparative perspective.<sup>7</sup> Finally, macrohistory leans towards simplification in the interest of generalizability. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analysis (1974-89) is perhaps the most well-known among the global models of macro-analysis that developed at the junction of history and sociology. Microhistorians sang a very different tune: "Why make things simple when we can make them complex?" (Revel 1989, xxiv; my translation). Or, in Levi's phrasing: "Microhistory tries not to sacrifice knowledge of individual elements to wider generalization, and in fact it accentuates individual lives and events. But, at the same time, it tries not to reject all forms of abstraction since minimal facts and individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomena" (1991, 109). Recently, Levi has argued that "historians should not generalize their answers; the real definition of history is that of a discipline that generalizes its questions, that is, a discipline that poses questions which have a general significance and yet recognizes that infinite answers are possible, depending on the local context" (2011, 175; my translation).<sup>8</sup>

On the basis of this abbreviated list, we would be hard pressed to find any point of convergence between micro- and macrohistory. I will now turn to some of the reasons why Italian microhistorians were rather unconcerned with global themes. I will then show where microhistory and global history have met so far. Finally, I will suggest additional points of intersection that could be fruitfully explored.

### IV.

Criticisms of "Western Civilization" ("WestCiv," in a jargon that may be either friendly or dismissive) animate even the most traditional of all modern world historians, although

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<sup>7</sup> Wolf (1982) is an early and important example of global history driven by a decisively non-Eurocentric bent.

<sup>8</sup> Levi (2011, 174) explicitly links this search for complexity in historical explanatory models to the political climate of the late 1970s and 80s, and particularly to the search for means of understanding class relations and the intersection between the material and the symbolic in ways that broke with crude Marxist materialism. See also n. 10.

few are immune themselves from such objections. In his formidable *A Study of History*, Toynbee criticizes the privileging of the nation state and high politics in historical scholarship, as well as the overt or hidden causal nexus postulated between the economic and the cultural domination of the West over the rest of the world. He objected strenuously to those who take “Civilization (in the singular and with a capital ‘C’)... to be identified with a single particular society.” In the 1930s, he concluded that “[t]he thesis that the present unification of the World on a Western basis is the consummation of a single continuous process which accounts for the whole of human history requires a violent distortion of historical facts and a drastic limitation of the historian’s field of vision” (Toynbee 1935-61, I.151). Even so, Toynbee obviously believed in the existence of such a thing as “Western civilization” and singled out those, like Brunelleschi and Machiavelli, who embodied its greatest achievements. An analogous ambivalence persists in the most accomplished and influential of his successors: according to William McNeil’s *The Rise of the West* (1963) the world had a multiplicity of centers up to 1500; thereafter the West asserted its primacy. A much updated version of the book, co-written by McNeil and his son, the environmental historian John R. McNeill, aims to displace this scheme by adopting the anti-hierarchical metaphor of the web (McNeill and McNeill 2003). And yet, the chronology and lines of causation proposed for the rise of the West are consistent with older narratives that posit, for example, a close link between “the commercial matrix of town life” and the “unusual dynamism” and “incessant innovation” of medieval European high culture, unmatched by “other, better-governed Eurasian societies” (2003, 146-47). Never explicitly invoked, Toynbee’s challenge-and-response framework also looms large over the story and is echoed most loudly in W.H. McNeill’s own postface (signed separately from that of his son), which presents global warming as the next challenge and praises “human resilience” in the face of “catastrophes – great and small” (2003, 326).

A brief and notable history of the world, *The Human Web* struggles with one of the most demanding tasks facing global history today: how to incorporate the perspective of non-Western societies, including the re-emergence of Asian superpowers, while continuing to write in a Western tradition that shaped Toynbee so profoundly. In other words, global historians confront questions about relativism and Eurocentrism. By contrast, Italian microhistorians were largely indifferent to these questions. To them, the word “relativism” evoked a different set of concerns. They wished to respond to trends in the humanities that, in the wake of the linguistic turn, they perceived as indicating a loss of confidence in empiricism and the quest for objectivity, without falling back into a naïve and conservative positivism. Ginzburg calls this endeavor “the distinctive quality of Italian microhistory” (1993, 32). They also battled against the lingering legacy of what they referred to as “ethnocentrism” (not Eurocentrism). Their critique of ethnocentrism grew out of the meeting of history and anthropology and called for dispensing with implicitly universalist presumptions about human behavior. At that time, it was a call *away* from world history. In 1979, Ginzburg and Poni maintained that, “[t]he demise of the ethnocentric illusion (which, paradoxically, coincided with the unification of the global market) has made untenable the idea of a universal history” (1991, 4; 1979, 184).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Later, Ginzburg would recall that “the rejection of ethnocentrism and of the teleology that...characterized the historiography transmitted by the nineteenth century” were among the features that Italian microhistory shared with François Furet’s revisionism, although ultimately for different reasons (1993, 21).

In the most influential empirical studies by Italian microhistorians, this critique was directed against the prevailing scholarly assumptions about how pre-industrial societies functioned rather than toward denunciations of orientalist and Eurocentric perspectives. These studies focused almost invariably on rural communities – such as those of the sixteenth-century Friuli or seventeenth-century Piedmont. The choice betrayed a post-Marxist leftist sympathy for the proletarian masses of pre-industrial societies.<sup>10</sup> It also responded to the need to identify locations that were sufficiently small to allow for a systematic survey of archival sources.<sup>11</sup> In his *Inheriting Power*, Levi labels as “ethnocentric” the representation of European peasants in the Old Regime by historians and social scientists who are blinded by the presumed universalism of modernization theory and the free market (1985, 51, 58; 1988, 36-37, 44).

Ginzburg’s use of the term ethnocentrism has evolved somewhat over time both independently from and in conjunction with the global turn. His earlier studies of Friulian peasants understood ethnocentrism as the distorting assumption of a sharp separation between written and oral, high and low culture (1966; 1976). Ginzburg then pushed his anthropological and historical approach to the study of witchcraft beyond the boundaries of Europe (1989b). More recently, he wrote an essay that, to my knowledge, is the only conscious attempt by a self-identified Italian microhistorian to address how questions about globalization affect the humanities.<sup>12</sup> Through a close reading of the colonization project outlined by a Swiss Calvinist who spent much of his life trading across the Indian Ocean in the early eighteenth century, Ginzburg aims to show that, in light of Marx and Weber’s theories of capitalism, this story “stands a chance of knocking down some of the barriers thought to divide microhistory and theory” (2005, 682). Although his conclusions in this essay are more evocative than systematic, his goal is – once again – to engage with established paradigms, this time for their explanatory value for transformations that have occurred on a global scale.

## V.

Most microhistories written outside of Italy do not articulate openly such bold methodological claims. Their distinguishing characteristic lies elsewhere: they are written in a narrative style.<sup>13</sup> While aware of the consequences that every choice about how to recount the past has on the historical discipline and its reading public, Italian

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<sup>10</sup> Levi (1990, 211-12, 217-18; 2011, 172-74) has been more vocal than others in connecting the intellectual genesis of microhistory to his political activism, which developed very much on the Left but closer to local and independent movements than to the two post-war Italian mass parties of the Left, the Communist Party (P.C.I.) and the Socialist Party (P.S.I.).

<sup>11</sup> A second-generation of microhistorians ventured more frequently into the urban landscape. See Gribaudi (1987) and Cerutti (1990).

<sup>12</sup> On “ethnocentrism” as a close proxy for Eurocentrism, see also Ginzburg (1999, 77; 2000, 97-98).

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, every text, whether scientific or humanistic, is a narration and as such, it has a plot and deploys rhetorical devices in order to persuade the reader. By ‘narrative style’ here I mean quite simply a mode of writing that is intentionally accessible, ostensibly transparent, and at least mildly entertaining. I purposefully gloss over the many and complex epistemological debates about narration and history that were particularly lively in the 1970s and 80s.



microhistorians (no matter how elegant their prose) were not committed to narration *per se*.<sup>14</sup> In fact, they aimed at turning the past into an unfamiliar territory, one that could acquire new meanings once well-known phenomena were placed under a microscope. By contrast, narrative history, broadly speaking, cherishes its putative ability to bring the past closer and allow readers to feel part of the worlds we have lost. Anthony Molho already remarked upon this aspect of what he depicts as a trans-Atlantic divergence in the practice of microhistorical analysis. In a piercing review, he took Gene Brucker's *Giovanni and Lusanna* – a self-described microhistory (1986, viii) – as exemplary of the different meanings that the word had acquired on either side of the ocean: “elegant narrative,” on the North American shores, and “theoretical richness and complexity of...analysis,” on the European continent (1987, 99).<sup>15</sup>

Posited in such categorical terms, this opposition obliterates the contributions of many Anglophone scholars who have worked to close the trans-Atlantic gap, first of all, Natalie Zemon Davis. Her 1975 collection of essays, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, did not invoke microhistory as a metaphor or a method but brilliantly anticipated some of its tenets, including the recourse to anthropological models and the micro-scale of analysis as a tool to test entrenched generalizations. Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982) soon became a classic because, while a gripping read, it also addressed substantive scholarly debates about gender, identity, and the very notion of story-telling. However, while securing the book's translation into Italian for the flagship publication of Italian microhistorians, Ginzburg (1984) emphasized the differences rather than the similarities between his and her understanding of microhistory. She saw her task as one of “generating not proofs, but historical possibilities;” there had to be room for the “‘perhapses,’ the ‘may-have-beens,’ to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing” (Davis 1982, viii).<sup>16</sup> But Davis' immediate interlocutors at the time (as in her 1987 book) were less Italian microhistorians than former colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley like Stephen Greenblatt and others who were then chartering new grounds for encounter between cultural historians and literary critics.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1990s, Edward Muir, a specialist of early modern Italy, did more than any other North American scholar to translate (literally and conceptually) the lessons of Italian microhistory and to reconcile them not only with conventional approaches in social and cultural history but also with insights from poststructuralism – two fronts which he pursued in a study of vendettas in Menocchio's homeland: sixteenth-century Friuli (Muir 1993; see also n. 18). Only a few Anglophone scholars, however, experimented in full with Ginzburg's own brand of microhistory, notably Florike Egmond and Peter Mason (1997), and even fewer with Levi's social scientific version.

For this reason, Molho's detection of a trans-Atlantic divergence in the conceptualization of microhistory contains more than a grain of truth. Both structural and contingent reasons account for this divergence. Its deep roots lie in the Whig tradition that assigns to historians the mission of memorializing past human struggles and triumphs

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ginzburg and Prosperi (1975); Ginzburg (1993, 23-24); Levi (1991, 106). On history, microhistory, and the historical novel, see also Rothschild (2011, 281-82, 454-55n59).

<sup>15</sup> See also Kuehn (1989).

<sup>16</sup> Davis has remained true to her credo to this day, as we shall see. In another work, she even constructed a fictional dialogue between herself and her female subjects of study (1995, 1-4).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the engagement with Martin Guerre's story in Greenblatt (1990, 131-145).

in a linear manner so as to render knowledge cumulative. Moreover, the narrative style has long held pride of place in Anglophone historiography in contraposition to both the typically dense prose of French scholars and the pseudo-scientific prose of the ‘hard’ social sciences. Thus, even as he dispensed with “any sense of inevitability or necessary progress,” Bernard Bailyn has vowed to fight for “intelligibility” (1994, 16) and against “the language of the behavioral sciences” (1994, 37). Finally, the trans-Atlantic crossing of Italian microhistory occurred at the height of the ‘new cultural history’ in the mid-1980s and early 90s, which no doubt contributed to a selective appropriation (particularly, though not exclusively, among historians who did not read Italian).<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the Anglophone world, microhistory became first of all a tool to shed light on marginal figures who entice everyone’s curiosity and mobilize readers’ empathy, sometimes to free scholars from evidentiary standards perceived to be too confining, and always to render academic writing accessible to a broader readership. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s celebrated *A Midwife’s Tale* (1990) does not present itself as a microhistory but shares some of these features, which helped it win the Pulitzer prize in history in 1991.<sup>19</sup>

## VI.

The so-called non-specialist reading public exerts its pull on microhistorians and global historians alike – perhaps most of all in the United States, where academics enjoy lower social status than in most of continental Europe and have come under attack for their alleged hyper-specialization and insularity. To write about human life across the world over millennia in a comprehensible narrative form is no longer an effect of the Whiggish tale of moral progress through history, but has become a response to criticisms that portray specialists as trapped in an ivory-tower mentality, indulging in obscure jargon and the investigation of minutiae that bear no relevance for ‘humanity’ at large. That this strategy can be quite effective, is suggested by the 1998 Pulitzer prize for general

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<sup>18</sup> Three volumes of English translations of essays originally published in *Quaderni Storici* (Muir and Ruggiero 1990, 1991, 1994) are at the same time the best evidence for and the means that enabled this selective appropriation. Missing from those volumes are foundational contributions by Levi, Poni, and other prominent Italian microhistorians who wrote on social and economic subjects, while pieces by scholars whose association with microhistory was tangential are included. *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe* collects five “examples of what might be called cultural microhistory” and only “three examples of what might be called social microhistory” (Muir and Ruggiero 1991, xi, xv). By contrast, the socio-economic wing of microhistory migrated to France, as testified by the works of Cerutti (1990), Gribaudi (1987), and Loriga (1991), as well as the collection edited by Revel (1996b). Grendi (1994, 541) is among those who insist on a division between a socio-economic and a cultural wing of Italian microhistory. By contrast, Cerutti (2004) and Ginzburg (2005, 682) deny the existence of such a division and point to the theoretical bases common to the entire core group of Italian microhistorians, regardless of their respective thematic interests. Several issues of *Quaderni Storici* in the 1990s also tried to show new points of intersection between social and cultural historical approaches derived from microhistory, including the study of legal practices. However, this view from the inside is not reflected in the actual reception of Italian microhistory abroad.

<sup>19</sup> Lepore (2001) examines the relationship between biography, microhistory, and academic scholarship among historians of the United States.

nonfiction awarded to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1997). For those historians who would otherwise be perceived as aloof, a narrative style comes in handy in order to reach beyond their own academic circles. This tendency has played no small role in the meeting of microhistory and global history. For a learned practitioner of both, "there can and should be no Olympian version of world history, and there is always a human and individual dimension" (Colley 2007, 300). In the words of a historian of East Asia, microhistory is a way of reviving the "human dramas that make history come alive" and thus to rebalance the field of world history, which "has tended toward the social science side of history" (Andrade 2011, 574). A scholar of Atlantic slavery distinguishes between the history of *slavery* as the subject of macro-structural historical accounts and the history of *slaves* as the subject of microhistory, that is, "world history from the perspective of the individual" (Zeuske 2006, 9; my translation).<sup>20</sup>

In his recent essay, Tonio Andrade invites others to "adopt microhistorical and biographical approaches to help populate our models and theories with real people, to write what one might call global microhistory" (2011, 574). He finds his ideals in a few "stories of individual lives in global contexts" (ibid.): Jonathan Spence's *The Question of Hu* (1989), Nathalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels* (2006), and Linda Colley's *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (2007). For Andrade, "The human focus makes the[se] books fun to read, exciting even, and they've reached a wide audience" (2011, 574). He puts the accent on the individual and on the global, more than on the microhistorical. Not coincidentally, no Italian scholar makes his list of exemplars.

Andrade puts his finger on two intertwined phenomena: the transformation of microhistory into narrative history and the injection of global themes, mostly read through a biographical lens, into microhistorical narrative. Having already commented on the former, I now turn to the latter. The biographical focus is part and parcel of microhistory's original intent and empirical contribution.<sup>21</sup> In the recent global turn, this perspective has been put to a specific use. The life of a single individual is reconstructed (sometimes thanks to the haphazard survival of personal papers, other times by piecing together scattered evidence from dispersed collections) in order to pursue the most elusive of all global history's assignments: to understand the multiple and overlapping connections across cultures and groups from the perspective of the actors involved in them, rather than from the point of view of the institutions that created the structures for the flourishing of those interactions and that generated most of the documentary traces that memorialized them. Less often, the biography (metaphorically speaking) of one city (Vidal 2005), one commodity (Stein 2008), or one year in time (Wills, Jr. 2001) serves this purpose.<sup>22</sup>

The central questions addressed by these stories of individual lives in the global arena are significantly different from those that animated Italian historians. Gone is the critique of modernization theories, functionalism, and schematic models of elite and popular culture. Gone also, for the most part, is an explicit engagement with "the

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<sup>20</sup> See also Ogborn (2008) and Finn (2010).

<sup>21</sup> For more in-depth reflections on the relation between biography, historiography of modern Europe, and microhistory, see Loriga (2010, esp. 259-63).

<sup>22</sup> Of the three examples cited in the text, Vidal (2005) is the only one to make explicit reference to Italian microhistorians. For a critical assessment of Vidal's problematic appropriation of Ginzburg's work, see Giuseppe Marcocci's review (2005, 180).

problems of proof and demonstration” (Levi 1991, 105). There remains a new, more literal (though no less important) question about ethnocentrism. The common enemy is now the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis, which negates colonial violence and domination, on the one hand, and the high degree of interdependence between colonizers and colonized, on the other, as well as the many occasions for borrowings and exchange that occurred outside of predetermined power dynamics. The most recurrent theme centers on the channels of communication and negotiation that bypassed those linguistic and cultural barriers that the clash of civilizations thesis assumes to be impermeable.

The protagonists of these global microhistories (as we may call them) are individuals who embody geographical and cultural dislocation. Not surprisingly, they often come from minority groups that were bound to be on the move and played a role as linguistic and cultural interpreters; hence the recurrence of Jewish protagonists. Italian microhistorians insisted that temporary and permanent migrations were a more frequent feature of pre-industrial European societies than was once believed. Global microhistorians couldn’t agree more with this idea, but are intent to demonstrate that the geographical and cultural distances traversed by men, and not infrequently by women and children, extended well beyond the regions of Europe. They show that the commercial and military expansion of Europe turned living in a plurality of cultures and away from ‘home’ a recurrent experience for common people, in spite of the relatively underdeveloped transportation technology, and that ocean crossing was not only for the heroes of WestCiv. Colley (2007) and Leonard Blussé (2002) purposefully choose women as their subjects to demonstrate that women, too, traveled for leisure in utterly foreign lands and had recourse to colonial juridical institutions. Robert Harms (2002) and Randy Sparks (2004) draw from documents that fit the “exceptional normal” of microhistorical fame in order to humanize the tragic history of African slaves in the early modern Atlantic – “to translate...statistics into people,” as Sparks puts it (2004, 5).

Almost invariably, the surviving primary sources used in global microhistories are less eloquent than one would wish. Rarely are the protagonists’ whereabouts and actions recorded in a detailed and transparent manner, not to speak of their understanding of cross-cultural encounters, which more often than not involved a mixture of coercion and agency, and an ample dose of wishful thinking and miscommunication. Many global microhistories therefore address concerns about sources – what they reveal, what they conceal, what they distort. But there seems to be an inverse correlation between the willingness of historians to elevate these concerns to pressing methodological questions and their preference for a narrative style. And in avoiding methodological issues, an author’s ideological propensities tend to drive the selection of evidence and color the narrative, especially where the possibility of productive encounters between historical actors belonging to different ‘civilizations’ is concerned.

In an early and most sophisticated example of this genre, Jonathan Spence (1988) paints the torments of a Chinese convert to Catholicism who traveled to Paris in the 1720s only to be accused of being mentally ill by those very Jesuits who purported to be interested in his culture and language when they took him on the long overseas journey. Discreetly but unmistakably, Spence unveils the Jesuits’ Eurocentric criteria by which Hu was judged and makes us feel the pain Hu must have experienced as a result of a crescendo of misunderstandings. Other biographical accounts of cross-cultural encounters are also shorn of idealization. *A Man of Three Worlds* (García-Arenal and Wiegers 1999)

follows a Moroccan Jew, Samuel Pallache, who built a career on his acrobatic ability to thread together the lines that separated Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism across the Mediterranean and Europe, with a clear sense of the external structures that affected his malleable loyalties and with no pretense to hold the key to his soul. Lucette Valensi (2008) stresses the cultural bridges built by the Tunisian Jew Mardochee Naggiar, who served the French Orientalists at the turn of the nineteenth century before being virtually forgotten by scholars. She acknowledges the extent to which her scholarly and personal familiarity with Naggiar's vanished world guided her through fragmentary sources, but resists all temptation to romanticize the past.

Davis' latest tour de force (2006) represents an opposite tendency: on the basis of scant evidence, it assembles an eloquent account of the mutually beneficial cultural encounters that could emerge even in a time of crusade-like religious hostilities and in the face of considerable power differentials. Leo Africanus, born al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan in Granada before the Reconquista, was the most famous Muslim captive held at the sixteenth-century papal court, where he was baptized as Johannes Leo de Medicis. In Davis' reading of his writings, coupled with abundant circumstantial evidence, before choosing to leave for Tunisia in the aftermath of the sack of Rome, Leo came to appreciate many aspects of the Catholic humanistic culture that welcomed him instrumentally for his linguistic skills. Davis's optimism derives largely from her confidence in her ability to reconstruct a plausible history even in the presence of considerable documentary gaps. In order to make her interpretative stratagem transparent to readers, Davis indulges in the "use of the conditional – 'would have,' 'may have,' 'was likely to have' – and the speculative 'perhaps,' 'maybe'" and wishes to construct "a plausible life story from materials of the time." (2006, 13) Echoing Grendi's aphorism, she chooses Leo because "an extreme case can often reveal patterns available for more everyday experience and writing" (11). And like a classic microhistory, *Trickster Travels* raises a big question that transcends Leo's own life: "Did the Mediterranean waters not only divide north from south, believer from infidel, but also link them through similar strategies of dissimulation, performance, translation, and *the quest for a peaceful enlightenment?*" (13; my emphasis). But the way in which Davis addresses this compelling and complex question is quite unlike the procedure followed by classic microhistories. She draws from contemporaneous texts and from modern scholarship in order to fill in the many blanks in Leo's nebulous biography, rather than focusing on Leo's life in order to shed new light on patterns of Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in the sixteenth-century Mediterranean. Here Davis seems to engage in what Dominick LaCapra calls "redemptive reading," a practice that "often leads to a projective reprocessing of the past," following which "the meaning redeemed is typically that which one desires in the present, and figures in the past tend to become vehicles or mouthpieces for contemporary values" (1995, 819).

## VII.

Italian microhistorians have sought to introduce the macro-picture into their micro-analyses primarily in two ways: via a systematic data gathering, so that an individual's

actions and beliefs could be placed in relation to those of his or her relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, and superiors (that was the case in Levi's study of Giovanni Battista Chiesa); or via a progressive distancing from a single text in order to identify echoes and filiations across a chosen galaxy of texts that would normally be ascribed to different cultural traditions (that is the method Ginzburg embraces most often). Both of these techniques can be applied productively to writing microhistory on a global scale, that is, when the macro also involves a trans-local geographical space.

This, at least, is what I attempted in my study of a cluster of Jewish merchants in the Tuscan port-city of Livorno and their far-reaching commercial networks during the first half of the eighteenth century (Trivellato 2009). In it, I attempted to do more than restore agency to an oppressed group or bring to light obscure commercial routes, and I have engaged with current debates in the humanities and social sciences about the analytical value of the ubiquitous term 'cosmopolitanism' and the role of culture and institutions in the rise of European commercial capitalism. Let me recapitulate briefly some of the insights that I borrowed and adapted from Italian microhistorians, while not limiting my inquiry to one location or one individual.

Commercial communities that carried goods, weapons, and ideas across continents and seas are a subject dear to global history. At the same time, most scholars of pre-modern trading diasporas assume that such collective entities, always vulnerable to outsiders, thrived on internal solidarity between members who shared family ties, religious customs, and other cultural traits. Rarely if ever do they inquire into the basis and extent of this solidarity. In so doing, albeit implicitly and often unintentionally, they depict trading diasporas as unable to function in competitive markets and as relying instead on secrecy, closeness, and the selective support of legal and political institutions whose assistance often proved to be a double-edged sword. Trading diasporas often follow the pattern traced by the first modern scholar to have studied them, Philip Curtin (1984). They often oscillate between two poles: on the one hand, they retain an aura of archaism; on the other, they embody the brave function of linking disparate regions of the globe. The exhaustive investigation of network relations as championed by Levi in his study of seventeenth-century Piedmont suggests ways to bypass this seeming paradox. It turns out that the Sephardim of Livorno did not extend their unconditional trust to all other Sephardim, and certainly not to all other Jews (indeed, they could be fooled by fellow Jews). Rather, they built networks within networks, to paraphrase Jonathan Israel's felicitous phrase (Israel 2002). These networks comprised numerous relatives and coreligionists, but also some Catholics and even a few Hindus in Goa, the capital of Portuguese India.

The composition and workings of these networks, however, force us to nuance Italian microhistorians' insistence on individual agency. That insistence was in part a reaction against a diverse host of interpretative models that dominated in the 1970s and 80s, ranging from standard accounts of Old Regime societies as static and stratified to Foucault's notion of the microphysics of power. Thus in Levi's words, for microhistory "all social action is seen to be the result of an individual's constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms" (1991, 94).

Even in the most tolerant port-cities of early modern Europe, legal norms and social codes restricted the life of Jews. To understand Sephardic merchants' economic behavior we ought to weigh agency and structure, and appreciate both the degrees of freedom and the normative constraints that governed Jewish-gentile relations wherever those merchants operated.<sup>23</sup> To this end, I resorted to the notion of "communitarian cosmopolitanism" in order to explain the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion that characterized the social, economic, and cultural interactions between religious groups in Livorno and other European cities. This notion helps us explain why, for example, Sephardic merchants continued to form general partnerships with close relatives and rarely availed themselves of the option to seal limited liability partnerships with whomever they choose, although the latter option would have allowed them to expand the number of their partners and raise additional capital. Socio-cultural rather than legal barriers account for why the Tuscan Catholic elites invested in limited liability partnerships run by Catholic merchants, but only rarely and then only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century in those run by Jews. Contrary to the 'pariah' ideal-type described by Max Weber, the Sephardim did not uphold a more primitive economic rationality, but exploited the legal and social systems available to them. While the result of an intensive scrutiny of local sources, this conclusion holds some validity for the comparative study of economic development. Grand schemes prevailing in global history tend to classify past societies into either "collectivist" or "individualist," but such a division appears inadequate to decipher the strategies of Livorno's Sephardim, who made use of both types of social action and cultural values.

As social scientists more than narrative historians, Italian microhistorians were driven by the desire to offer a new conceptualization of the connection between social action and cultural beliefs. They posited a relationship between material bases and symbolic representations but, dissatisfied with the images of coherent cultural systems presented by Marxism, functionalism, and interpretative anthropology, stressed instead "the ambiguities of the symbolic world, the plurality of possible interpretations of it and the struggle which takes place over symbolic as much as material resources" (Levi 1991, 95). No all-encompassing theory emerged from this postulate, but there is no denying its relevance for current and future developments of global history. It curbs the propensity to project sweeping cultural meanings to a hastily described economic behavior or to resurrect obsolete paradigms about the sequential evolution of cultural formations. My analysis of commercial sources such as business correspondence and merchants' manuals demonstrates that, long before legal emancipation, Jewish merchants involved in international trade partook of a non-denominational European commercial culture, which Europeans also exported beyond the boundaries of Europe by means of economic incentives and violence. Yet this non-denominational commercial culture was far from synonymous with a genuinely curious and open-minded culture. It also constituted only a limited slice of Jews' cultural and social experience. Market relations surely lessened prejudice but did not tear down all doors. In early modern corporate societies, legal status and social separateness never ceased to count.

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<sup>23</sup> Microhistory seems to have contributed to a shift away from structuralism, which lay at the heart of the *Annales* tradition. See the editorial of an issue entitled "Histoire et sciences sociales: un tournant critique" in *Annales*, 44.6 (1989): esp. 1319-20. On the other hand, Loriga (2011, 75) also remarks on the accentuated insistence on free will among many Italian microhistorians.

To focus on one Jewish community and its relations with the surrounding non-Jewish state and society – a common approach to Jewish history – would not have allowed me to reach the conclusions I just discussed. From microhistory, I came to understand the importance of reflecting on a concept historians often take as self-evident, that of ‘context,’ and reconstructing, as much as possible, the ways in which actors understood it (Levi 1991, 106-08; Revel 1995, 500-01 and 1996a, 25-26). Revel goes as far as claiming that, “there is...no hiatus, let alone an opposition, between local history and global history” (1996a, 26; my translation). I thus tried to show empirically how the lives and economic strategies of Livorno’s Sephardim had both a local and a global dimension, and why the local and the global cannot be conceived along a series of hierarchically ordered concentric circles widening from small to large. In my story, family alliances, the Sephardic diaspora, all Jews, the city of Livorno and the grand duchy of Tuscany, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean, other trading communities and the political economy of state powers, they all intersect with one another simultaneously. None offers an a priori explanatory context. Actors reshaped aspects of each entity while adapting to externally imposed structures. Whatever direction global history will take, the problem of defining what ‘context’ means to its practitioners, and what it meant to actors of the past, won’t go away.

Emma Rothschild’s recent *The Inner Life of Empires* (2011) opens up alternative and complementary ways of thinking about how to integrate micro and global history. If compared to the exercise that I undertook and summarized, it also provides a remedy to the disjuncture, which some have remarked upon, between the Italian microhistory’s two branches –one focused on social, political, and economic phenomena and one concerned with intellectual and cultural processes.<sup>24</sup> Cross-cultural encounters figure prominently in *The Inner Life of Empires* but are not its sole concern, as in most of the microhistories with a global reach that have appeared so far. The energizing possibility of what Rothschild terms “a new kind of microhistory” is that “of connecting micro- and macrohistories by the history of the individuals’ own connections” (2011, 7). As she zooms into the lives of eleven siblings of some means born in the heartland of Scotland between 1723 and 1739, Rothschild inevitably runs up a burgeoning array of connections. Those between the Johnson brothers and sisters and their dark-skinned Bengali slave accused of infanticide occupy considerable space but do not detract from the attention given to the Johnsons’ connections with illustrious Scots of the likes of David Hume and Adam Smith and with their more obscure spouses, friends, and associates. If Rothschild reminds us that the difficulty of merging the history of ideas and the history from below was “a very eighteenth-century dilemma” (268), she also persuades us that “the new microhistory of connected lives” (279) can best penetrate the evanescent but revolutionary confluence of changes that occurred in the public and private arena. Not only were the East and West Indies more joined in the lives and minds of eighteenth-century Britons than they are in modern scholarship, but personal trajectories of lesser-known individuals both affected and reflected the emergence of new ideas and institutions about trade, government, and the human condition. For Rothschild, “a large micro history” is necessary to show how the Johnsons’ lives “traversed or

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<sup>24</sup> See n. 18. Admittedly, *The Inner Life of Empires* should be read first of all as a development of Rothschild’s *Economic Sentiments* (2001), which focused on the moral reflections of eighteenth-century theorists of *laissez faire*.



transgressed the distinctions between different sides of eighteenth-century life, economic, political, and domestic,” and thus the need for “a transgression...of the distinctions between different kinds of history” (2011, 269) –the history of commerce, empires, political economy, enlightenment, slavery, intimate and moral sentiments.

The inspiration for this “new kind of microhistory” comes from Poni and Ginzburg’s 1979 “manifesto of microhistory” (Rothschild 2011, 269), whose instigation to follow personal names across multiple records as Ariadne’s threads today yields even greater fruits thanks to the digitization of library and archival collections and the proliferation of websites (some more reliable than others) devoted to family genealogies. “The new technologies offer the possibility of a new way of connecting the microhistories of individuals and families to the larger scenes of which they were part” (278). Rothschild, however, highlights, rather than conceals, the lacuna in her records. These new technologies do not resolve questions about the representativeness of the subjects of microhistorical studies. In fact, in periods of information overload (both the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries), we become even more aware of how incomplete and biased surviving historical records are. But as Rothschild lucidly points out – building on Revel – “the increase in the quantity of information can...make possible a change in the quantity of information, or in the resolution or the size of microhistories” (278), and thereby enhancing the facility with which we integrate micro and macro analysis.

## VIII.

Microhistorians have been compared to truffle hunters in contrast to those historians who, like parachutists, survey wide vistas. Even if we do not interpret this image as deprecatory of microhistorians, we must admit that microhistory is ill-suited to the study of change over time. It digs out details that are significant enough to undermine the foundations of existing grand narratives, but struggles to replace them with new ones. More like anthropologists than sociologists, microhistorians unravel hidden connections between aspects of a social and cultural system that would be invisible to a macro analysis. And like anthropologists, they tend to adopt a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach.<sup>25</sup> I venture to argue that such a synchronic approach can provide a valuable counterweight to the fast pace at which most macrohistorical accounts proceed from one event, one century, and one civilization to the other. It can add not only detail but also analysis, especially with regard to how comparisons are drawn.

Ginzburg cites Marcel Mauss (1966) to express his conviction that microhistory can deliver convincing comparisons: “A single case analyzed in depth will suffice to provide the basis for an extensive comparison” (Ginzburg 2005, 682n56).<sup>26</sup> Few empirical studies written by Italian microhistorians live up to such high expectations, but the heuristic

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<sup>25</sup> For the relevance of both approaches to historical writing, see Sewell, Jr. (2005, 183-84).

<sup>26</sup> Mauss writes (in the English translation of his *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology*): “When a relation has been established in one case, even a unique case but one that has been carefully and systematically studied, the result is as valid as any that can be demonstrated by resorting to numerous facts which are but disparate, curious examples confusingly culled from the most heterogeneous societies, races or cultures” (1979, 20).

potential of comparison is there. To return to my earlier example, when seen in light of grand schemes of structural change over time, trading diasporas are often confined to a transitory phase in pre-capitalist economies. But if subjected to a micro-analysis, each trade diaspora displays its specificities in terms of internal composition and interaction with outsiders. Rather than proclaiming the uniqueness of each trading diaspora, these specificities can foster more accurate comparisons with consequential implications for our understanding of commercial capitalism in general. Thus, while the historical and sociological literature tends to pair Jewish and Armenian merchants from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as exemplary trading diasporas, microhistorical studies reveal important differences between the two groups, which, in turn, help account for the considerable differences in their respective commercial organization (cf. Trivellato 2009, 2011; Aslanian 2011). By abandoning the idea of a prototypical ‘trading diaspora,’ we gain a richer basis for further comparisons across time and space at a moment when hard social sciences dominate the field of comparative macro analysis.

Historians often express frustration at the simplifications on the basis of which comparative social scientists construct units of analysis or run statistical regressions, yet few venture into the field of comparative history. Kenneth Pomeranz’s comparison of European/British and Asian/Chinese economic development in the eighteenth century can be criticized for its fuzzy units of comparison and for the uneven data at his disposal, but its lasting impact is owing to the brilliant attempt to integrate micro and macro dimensions in the comparison (Pomeranz 2000). While advancing a different interpretation of the great divergence, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong (2011) also conduct a comparative economic analysis on multiple scales and conclude that “differences in political scale” (ibid., x) were decisive for the fate of China and Europe. It is perhaps not a coincidence that these two studies, which constantly integrate micro- and macro-perspectives, are also among those that most vigorously seek to reconcile the historians’ passion for complexity and the economists’ drive toward simplification and prediction.<sup>27</sup>

## IX.

Italian microhistory aimed to be ‘big history’ not because it sought to embrace 13 billion years of human life on earth, but because it wished to say something big about history.<sup>28</sup> At a minimum, it aimed to raise big questions about how social and cultural systems emerge and evolve, as well as the methods humanists and social scientists adopt to interpret them. The degree of success that microhistory achieved is obviously open to

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<sup>27</sup> On the methodological chasm separating microhistory as conducted by historians in North America and economic history as practiced by economists, along with possible ways of bridging it, see also Lamoreaux (2006).

<sup>28</sup> The enterprise known as “big history” traces the history of humanity from the origins of the universe (dated at 13 billion years ago by big bang cosmology – a welcome recap in times of resurgent creationism) to the present, but it is ultimately projected into the future. That is, it contributes less to the ways in which we understand the past than it reminds us that human societies can only develop in relation to nature at a time when natural resources are being depleted at unprecedented speed. See Christian (2004); Brown (2007); Spier (2010).

debate but the aspirations of its Italian initiators went well beyond telling a good story. Those aspirations were the product of the time when and the place where they developed as much as the offspring of a particular group of scholars. Today's historical and historiographical landscape is naturally different, in fact, very different. I hope to have shown how some of the issues raised by Italian microhistorians may nonetheless provide constructive input for academic practitioners of global history. Even sympathetic observers have doubted whether this is possible. As part of his biting critique of the different brands of Eurocentrism that affect most Western scholars of world history (including those adherents to the post-colonial studies' credo that the scientific writing of history is a post-Enlightenment European invention), Sanjay Subrahmanyam seems to dismiss those who "have enthusiastically supported the view that 'microhistory' can capture the macrocosm" (2005, 29). But his recently published Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures suggest that his skepticism may have been directed more toward the hopefulness about past inter-cultural encounters conveyed in several of the global microhistories mentioned above than about the heuristic value of biographies and the micro-analysis of texts and phenomena belonging to more than one place and one intellectual tradition. He calls himself "less optimistic than [Natalie Zemon] Davis" and maintains that in the early modern period "cultures met frequently in situations of 'contained conflict'" (2011, 138). Without wishing to force Subrahmanyam into a box he doesn't belong in, we can't fail to notice that his scholarship appears to share a core premise with Italian microhistorians. In his own words: "generalizations are... too important to be left to specialized generalists" (1997, 742). Moreover, the *connected histories* that Subrahmanyam champions (ibid.), though with no explicit discussion of the micro-scale, displays a predilection for synchronic convergences and comparisons over long-term evolution overtime.

At times, the growing influence of the historical turn in the quantitative social sciences appears to narrow rather than expand the dialogue across disciplines, pushing historians into the role of mere narrators of the past and delegating the interpretation of the past (and of past large-scale phenomena most particularly) to social scientists. Historians often assume this role willingly and consciously, if defiantly. In 1979 Lawrence Stone famously detected a "revival of the narrative" among historians and attributed it to a widespread "disillusionment with economic or demographic monocausal determinism and with quantification" (1979, 13), typified then by the Annales school in France and by cliometrics in North America. This disillusionment, in turn, animated "a desire [among many historians] to make their findings accessible once more to an intelligent but not expert reading public, which is eager to learn what these innovative new questions, methods and data have revealed, but cannot stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose" (ibid., 15). In the 1970s, Italian microhistorians were no less disillusioned with economic and demographic determinism, but reacted in ways remarkably different from those described by Stone. Today, more than a quarter century after those debates held sway, we can still hear their echo. Global historians have grown in number and sophistication, but materialistic and culturalist explanations for the rise of the West are hardly defunct. In fact, macro-analysis often leads to generalizations that were once associated with that very Eurocentrism global history purports to undo. In this scholarly panorama, microhistory offers neither a panacea nor a unified theory, but can provide a device (or at least a prod) to balance abstraction and detail, to pause on apparent inconsistencies and detect parallelisms that a

hasty emphasis on structural breaks would dismiss unjustly, to think creatively outside of the box of ‘civilizations’ about the ways in which cultural forms evolve in relation to political and economic structures. If nothing else, a careful consideration of how to juxtapose micro- and macro-units of analysis and how to conduct comparisons across space and time belongs to the future agenda of global historians. With no small dose of hubris, Italian microhistorians refused to concede such compelling methodological problems to the hard social sciences. We may wish to return to their writings not to find a common ground between optimistic and pessimistic accounts of people’s ability to get along, but to renew and embolden original efforts to blend together social scientific analysis and narration, this time on the global stage.

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