

MICROSTORIA/MICROHISTOIRE/MICROHISTORY

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On 11 April 2014, the Institute of French Studies at New York University sponsored a symposium entitled “History, Memory, and Scaling of the Past: A Tribute to Jacques Revel.”¹ In preparing my paper for that occasion, which appears here in a slightly revised form, I was struck once again by the extensive academic commentary that now exists, in multiple languages, on one of the proposed subjects, “the scaling of the past,” and more specifically on microhistory. Yet this tribute also demanded that we ask, one more time, what is microhistory?

Nearly forty years after the publication of Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), arguably the most famous of all microhistories, the question remains more relevant than ever. Since that landmark study appeared, microhistory has evolved, has meant different things to different constituencies within and beyond the academy, and has blended and clashed with other scholarly genres and agendas. More than any other trend, global history has raised new challenges for microhistory. Microhistory has literally been dwarfed by the rising tide of world and global history, the spatial turn, big history, and big data. At the same time, microhistory’s central argument—that a variation of scales of analysis breeds radically new interpretations of commonly accepted grand narratives—has acquired new urgency as globalization and its discontents demand that historians produce new grand narratives about the ways in which interconnections and hierarchies have developed on a planetary scale. In a forum entitled “How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History,” the content of which was recently published in the *American Historical Review*, historians from different fields discussed some of the paths that the profession has embarked on in response to this demand, and it is interesting to note that “the question of scale” is understood to be a matter of time as much as space.²

Here I wish to conduct a small exercise and use the variation of scale as a tool to analyze what might hide behind the label ‘microhistory’—in other



words, I wish to apply the microhistorical method to microhistory as a historiographical trend. Truth be told, I wish Jacques Revel could conduct this exercise. The result would no doubt be a virtuoso reading. If my account has one advantage, however, it is that I can more freely feature the defining role that Revel has played and continues to play in the saga of microhistory.

As a scholar, Revel has reflected more than most on the status of history as a discipline and its manifold articulations across the West. As a university administrator, he has incorporated his vision of history into the structure of academic programs. Microhistory has been at the center of his interests for a long time. He has done more, in fact, than any other to translate (literally and conceptually) the theoretical ambitions of a small group of Italian microhistorians and to place them into broader debates. I emphasize Revel's dual role as a scholar and an administrator because the synergy between the two cannot be taken for granted. Today, in the United States and in much of Europe, the two roles are increasingly seen as following parallel—if not divergent—tracks, as many among the faculty, particularly in the humanities, perceive administrators as a managerial caste more and more disconnected from the research and pedagogical missions of colleges and universities. The senior administration of New York University, where Revel has been Global Distinguished Professor since 2005, is not alone in its struggle with many faculty over important decisions for the future of the university, including questions concerning its Manhattan and Abu Dhabi campuses.³

Revel's career unfolded at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, where he was also president from 1995 to 2005. That famed institution appears to have allowed an enviable synergy between research and institutional goals. Revel has, in addition, taught for brief periods (sometimes on a recurrent basis) not only at NYU but also at a great many distinguished institutions of higher learning in the United States, Europe, Israel, Argentina, China, Korea, and India—developing personal and intellectual ties in each and every place.

Microhistory has taught us the importance of reconstructing networks of relations in order to understand how meanings are forged and how power is distributed. We could learn a great deal by tracing the intellectual, personal, and institutional connections that Revel forged in each of the institutions he visited. The task would, however, go beyond the goals of this piece. Let me emphasize instead a smaller but essential point. Even our globalized academic world—one in which a privileged class of students and researchers travel, study, teach, and exchange ideas across political and linguistic boundaries—is not one without borders or hierarchies. Ideas and concepts travel, but they are changed in the process, and sometimes do not translate easily or at all. Developments such as email, commercial airlines, credit cards, and the euro have dramatically altered our lives when compared to those of pre-modern globe trotters like Ibn Battuta or Leo Africanus. But even global universities still need cross-cultural brokers—scholars who formulate intellectual projects that tran-

scend local interests, who inspire by example, and who know the joys and perils of cross-cultural communication. For Italian microhistorians and many others, Revel has been that broker and much more.

I am fortunate to be able to speak, at least in part, from experience. I first met Revel in the courtyard of a beautiful fifteenth-century building that in the 1980s and 90s used to house the Department of History of the University of Venice, in Italy, where I was a college student working under the guidance of Giovanni Levi. Levi would invite his distinguished friends to speak at events and we—young and eager—flocked to them. At the time, as most college students, I was not sure whether I could or even wished to ‘become a historian’—whatever that means. I was mostly preoccupied with a political youth movement called *La Pantera* that was battling a ministerial reform of the university system.⁴ (Berlusconi had not yet come to power and we didn’t know how much worse things would get.) I was less than enthralled with the fact that too many of my history classes required that I remember names and dates (which I always found challenging). I had no real fascination with the past *per se*. Up until then, I had lived only in a city, Venice, which basked in its past glories. To me, however, Venice seemed almost normal (that is, the opposite of special) and its past not worth endless celebration.

In 1990, Revel had come to Venice to discuss issues of truthfulness in historical representation with the Italian novelist Daniele Del Giudice as part of a series of not-for-credit academic activities sponsored by our youth movement. I am not sure how much my fellow college students and I understood of the debate. But during a coffee break, with the gentle pithiness that characterizes him, Revel turned to me and said something to this effect: “There are historians who love the past, and historians who love the challenge that comes with trying to make sense of the past.” That aphorism had a liberating effect. Suddenly, to be a historian meant neither to remember names and dates nor to recreate the colors, smells, and sounds of past daily life. I did not need to be enthralled by the remnants of the past that surrounded me. I could use my questions about the present—including about that troubling ministerial reform—to interrogate the past, without distorting it more than any other historian might. At the time, I did not fully understand that, in one lapidary sentence, Revel was explicating the complex difference between varieties of historiographical approaches, as well as varieties of approaches to microhistory. That, and much more, I would come to appreciate in the months, years, and decades to come.

The paper trail of Revel’s reflections on the “*projet micro-historique*” goes back to 1989, when he included a penetrating introduction—entitled *Histoire au ras du sol*—to the French translation of Levi’s book on a seventeenth-century Piedmont exorcist, *Le Pouvoir au village*.⁵ I believe it was the first time that a non-Italian scholar articulated the experimental nature of *microstoria* in relation to existing practices of historical research and writing. Levi and his colleagues, including Ginzburg but also Simona Cerutti, Edoardo Grendi, Raul

Merzario, Carlo Poni, and others, were after something bigger than the seeming minutia of past experiences. By zooming in on the land transactions between relatives and neighbors in a close-knit community, on the life of an eccentric miller, on the changing institutional organization of a group of artisans, or on the chains of migration out of mountain villages, they aimed at nothing less than revising accepted narratives about the emergence of modernity and tackling large methodological questions such as the relationship between case-study and generalizations, between material conditions and symbolic representations, and between empirical reconstruction and narration.

Revel's reading of Italian *microstoria* in that introduction and in subsequent publications is important for many reasons. For one, it gave *microstoria* a coherence it both lacked and resisted. Italian microhistorians have always rejected the idea that they might constitute anything akin to a school. (All of them are contrarian by nature, but also, I presume, less than eager to embrace a label that in Italy is more often associated with academic feudalism than with intellectual creativity.) Not housed in one single academic institution, self-described microhistorians and their entourage constituted more of an intellectual galaxy than an empire with core and peripheries. The book series "microstorie," published by Einaudi since 1981, and the academic journal *Quaderni Storici*, launched in 1980, served as their main platforms, while never becoming instruments of orthodoxy. A few theoretical pieces, some published in English by Levi and Ginzburg, have gone a long way toward articulating the common premises and aspirations of Italian microhistorians and the different contributions made by various authors.⁶ But as is always the case, these manifestos exerted only partial control over subsequent interpretations. Exactly what goals microhistory was pursuing thus becomes a question that can be answered differently depending on one's point of observation and scale of analysis.

In 2004 and 2005, in two separate publications, Cerutti and Ginzburg denied that Italian microhistorians could be divided into a socio-economic and a cultural wing and asserted from an emic perspective, that is, the perspective of the actors involved in the process, the commonality of intentions among the two.⁷ That they felt the need to make this claim is in of itself revealing. Their emic perspective—borrowing from anthropological terminology that both Cerutti and Ginzburg often used—evidently did not fully match the etic account of external observers. Other early protagonists of Italian *microstoria* have been more ambivalent about the unity of that group. Grendi noted a friction between the followers of Ginzburg's cultural analysis and the practitioners of economic and political microhistory. In his characteristically poignant if elusive language (it is Grendi who coined the famous oxymoron, "the exceptional normal"), he spoke of "une communauté de style" among a loose group of scholars who shared an aversion to the rhetorical excesses in which most Italian historians indulged and who preferred analysis over synthesis.⁸ But what—if anything—really held Italian microhistorians together? A

disposition that shunned abstraction and grand theories? A commitment to both empiricism and self-reflexivity? A pronounced faith in the ability of individuals (mostly men) to shape the course of events? A political inclination toward the non-Communist Left in the country with the largest Communist party in Western Europe? Perhaps it was a mixture of all these things.

E pluribus unum? Out of a heterogeneity of subjects, personalities, and approaches, did *microstoria* emerge as one? By the time Cerutti and Ginzburg affirmed the unity of Italian *microstoria*, fifteen years had elapsed since Revel's *Histoire au ras du sol*. During that time, Italian microhistorians wrestled with internal divisions, while a multiplicity of authors across Europe and the world borrowed their work for a variety of goals, and in so doing transformed the microhistorical approach.

In *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, a 1996 collection of essays by Italian and French scholars, many of whom were closely associated with microhistory, Revel speaks of a "réception américaine" of the Italian *microstoria* centered on Ginzburg and his evidentiary paradigm and "une version française" hinging on social history and its reconceptualization.⁹ This transatlantic divide in the reception of microhistory is one of the main reasons why the term conjures up different associations. The story would be even more complicated if we threw British, German, and other national varieties of microhistory into the mix, but for our purposes here, I'll stay within the Italo-Franco-North American confines.

France's receptivity to Italian microhistory was due to a convergence of structural and contingent factors. The themes that socio-economic microhistorians investigated (share-cropping, marriage alliances, migration, clientelism) resonated with many French historians, especially those involved with the *Annales* school, who studied similar topics. Italian microhistorians, in fact, deliberately chose their topics in order to question key tenets of the *Annales* revolution. An early common sentiment among Italian microhistorians was enmity toward totalizing and imperious theories—Marxism, modernization theory, and structural functionalism, but also and perhaps especially Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* and its variants. What better challenge than battling the enemy on its own soil?¹⁰

The contingent factors for the "version française" of Italian microhistory are easily summarized with two words: Jacques Revel. The EHESS on Boulevard Raspail proved an essential point of reference that allowed Levi, his closest colleagues, and several of his students to engage with international scholars more than in any other single venue. While history's split disciplinary identity in the United States between the humanities and the social sciences was becoming increasingly contentious in the 1980s and 90s, microhistory in France could continue to reside comfortably among the *sciences humaines*.

What Revel called "la réception américaine" of Italian microhistory was also shaped by both larger forces and personal networks, but considerably different ones from the French. In North America, the process of adoption soon

began to look more like one of great divergence. The transatlantic drift between *microstoria* and *microhistoire*, on the one hand, and microhistory, on the other, can be attributed to at least three factors. First, questions that are central to all these trends—namely, questions about narration and agency—in the United States had begun to be discussed independently of Italian microhistory. Natalie Zemon Davis thus elaborated a very different interpretation of the virtues of reducing the scale of analysis and of focusing on single biographies. Second, the scholars who most actively translated (and here I mean literally) the work of Italian microhistorians were students of the Italian Renaissance, fascinated more by Ginzburg's work than by social and economic history. The result was, therefore, much different than the one produced by the literal and conceptual translations championed by Revel. Thirdly, the rising tide of world and global history in the United States called for different uses of microhistory than those conceived in Italy in a Cold-War setting, in which walls and boundaries were everywhere and hard to tear down.

Let me review, briefly, each of these three areas of reception and transformation. As a consequence of trends within and outside academia, microhistory in the United States is most closely associated with two keywords: agency and narrative history. Agency is more than a catch-all word. In our discipline it stands for an emphasis on the individual's ability to resist and shape the larger forces of history and is, almost inevitably, intertwined with a narrative writing style. A narrative style—as opposed to a social scientific type of analysis—is prized not only for its accessibility to a larger audience but also for its suitability to recover the subjectivity, and even the interiority, of individual protagonists—whether it be the Founding Fathers or the marginal figures (peasants, wet-nurses, captives) whom microhistorians have sought to rescue from oblivion. In the country that until recently could affirm its faith in the American dream, free agency, individual talent, and *homo faber fortunae suae*, biography never suffered the blows that it did in France at the hands of the *Annales*. A long Anglophone tradition of transparency and accessibility in academic writing (a tradition often defined in explicit opposition to the perceived opacity of French academic prose) has helped fend off persistent accusations of elitism launched against the academy and at the same time provided a fertile terrain for microhistory to blossom. It was, after all, as early as 1979 when Lawrence Stone proclaimed that narrative had struck back.¹¹

The most well-known piece of microhistory together with Ginzburg's *Cheese and the Worms* is certainly Davis's 1982 *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Both have been justly praised and have exerted enormous influence. *The Return of Martin Guerre* was conceived as a movie script before it was written as an academic book. The film (starring Gérard Depardieu), Davis recounts, offered her a most special "history laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities;" yet it also "posed the problem of invention to the historian."¹² The treasure troves of rare book libraries and provincial archives could only offer partial empirical truths. Rather than hiding it, Davis, one of the

most imaginative historians of the twentieth century, chose to make “the problem of invention” into one of her central preoccupations. *The Return of Martin Guerre* thus not only advanced scholarship on questions of gender, identity, and peasant life in sixteenth-century France, but also spurred debates about the knowledge processes associated with story-telling. For Davis microhistory was merely a tool to analyze these profound issues at the core of academic debate. In her *Women on the Margins*, a collection of three biographies of a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jewish woman in early modern Europe, Davis included a fictional dialogue between herself and the subjects of her study.¹³ Biography and narrative make for empathy. And in her latest tour de force, *Trickster Travels*, Davis fills the “silences and occasional contradictions and mysteries” surrounding Leo Africanus’s enigmatic biography by making use of “the conditional—‘would have,’ ‘may have,’ ‘was likely to have’—and the speculative—‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe’—” in order to reconstruct “a plausible life story.”¹⁴ Admittedly, Davis never refers to her book as a microhistory. Her characterization of Leo Africanus as “an extreme case” may echo Grendi’s “exceptional normal,” but *Trickster Travels* is also antithetical to a microhistory insofar as it uses historical context to fill evidentiary gaps in the biography of an individual more than it exploits the idiosyncrasies of a life story (and its paper trail) in order to challenge conventional historiographical renderings of that very context.¹⁵ In his review of *Trickster Travels*, Clifford Geertz suggests that the book takes “a different, in some ways even bolder, track” than Davis’ previous microhistories.¹⁶ All of these caveats, however, have not prevented the labeling of *Trickster Travels* as a microhistory in common academic parlance.¹⁷ The point here is less to categorize works according to a purist definition of microhistory than to appreciate the range of scholarship with which this label is now associated, especially in North America.¹⁸

The marriage of microhistory with ‘the conditional tense’ is what troubled Ginzburg the most and what contributed to the initial transatlantic drift between *microstoria* and microhistory. While securing the translation of *The Return of Martin Guerre* for the Italian flagship publication of *microstoria*, Ginzburg included a preface in which he stressed the differences rather than the similarities between his and Davis’s understanding of the genre.¹⁹ His arrival at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1988 coincided with the English translation of that preface as a stand-alone piece and the beginning of Ginzburg’s most vocal and persistent warnings against “the radically antipositivist skepticism that attacks the reliability of texts as such.”²⁰ In light of the robustness of history as a discipline and a profession, the targets of his polemics do not always appear as perilous as he presented them, but his call for a self-reflexive and sophisticated empiricism justly gained him admirers the world over, including in the United States, where the linguistic turn was most influential. For a variety of reasons, in spite of its obvious relation to French theory, the linguistic turn in Italy and even in France did not escalate the crisis over the status of historical knowledge and writing to the same level

as it did in the United States. This transatlantic divide was yet another factor that contributed to the divergence between the French and the American receptions of the work of Italian microhistorians.

Interest in cultural (rather than socio-economic) history was also on the rise in North America at the time when Ginzburg moved to UCLA. That is when Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, specialists of Renaissance Venice, began assembling three volumes of English translations of essays originally published in *Quaderni Storici*.²¹ Less radical than Lynn Hunt's 1989 edited collection *The New Cultural History*, these volumes, which appeared in 1990, 1991, and 1994, nonetheless also focused on cultural and gender history.²² These English translations omitted foundational pieces by prominent microhistorians who wrote on social and economic subjects, while they included chapters by Italian scholars whose association with *microstoria* was loose at best. Muir and Ruggiero thus took for granted and at the same time exacerbated the distinction between a socio-economic and a cultural wing of *microstoria* that Cerutti and Ginzburg would later deny. Their edited volumes reflected as well as became a source for the selective transatlantic migration of the "projet micro-historique."

As the long-standing collaboration between Revel and Hunt, among others, testifies, Franco-American scholarly cooperation has yielded many fruitful outcomes.²³ Within the microhistorical camp, however, the disjunctions are many and deep. Since the 1990s, the rise of global history has intensified these disjunctions, even when it intended to reconcile them. I refer here to the meeting in recent years of global history and microhistory on an old terrain: the nexus between agency and narrative. Linda Colley stated, "There can and should be no Olympian version of world history, and there is always a human and individual dimension."²⁴ Her not-so-veiled reference is to Braudel's *Méditerranée*, in which the French historian, after noting that "the role of the individual and the event necessarily dwindles" alongside structural changes dictated by climate, demography, and the like, asked, "but are we right to take so Olympian a view?"²⁵ The question was merely rhetorical. So Olympian was the trilogy on world capitalism that Braudel published after the *Méditerranée* that Colley and other historians had every right to claim that the pendulum had to swing back. At the turn of the twentieth century, they felt the need to turn the spotlight back onto the lives of individuals, this time individuals who—sometimes forcibly, sometimes willingly—crossed distances and cultural divides that boggle the mind of modern travelers.

What Colley advocates can appear, at first sight, to be a fulfillment of Revel's dictum: "Il n'existe donc pas d'hiatus, moins encore d'opposition entre histoire locale et histoire globale. Ce que l'expérience d'un individu, d'un groupe, d'un espace permet de saisir, c'est une modulation particulière de l'histoire globale."²⁶ In reality, the integration of local and global history, which was a fundamental ambition of Italian and French microhistory, has proven challenging for those who hold dear the notion that the multiplication of

scales of analysis—rather than the valorization of the micro scale and the biographical—is microhistory's most valuable heuristic device.

Tonio Andrade echoes Colley in applauding the advance of what he dubs "global microhistory." "World history has tended toward the social science side of history," he writes. "But we've tended to neglect the human dramas that make history come alive."²⁷ That may be an accurate rendition of prevailing trends in world and global history, but is it an accurate rendition of *microstoria's* aspirations? In giving voice to those aspirations, in the 1980s Revel had also coined the most incisive slogan for Italian microhistorians of the early generation: "pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué?"²⁸ To complicate in the late 1980s meant to reject the grand narratives of modernization theory and its historiographical correlates: the homogenizing effects of the early modern state, the suppression of popular culture, and the rise of impersonal markets. It also meant tackling the hardest questions in all *sciences humaines*: questions of proof and demonstration, questions of how we arrive at our generalizations. The variation of scale was a tool to search for new, unsettling answers.

When it comes to writing the history of the globe over millennia, new answers are hard to come by. The academy and the larger public pressure us to produce new sweeping interpretations of human history—and even to move well beyond human history in our study of the past. Italian microhistorians undid many of our certainties but left us grappling with how to explain change over time in a systematic way. An anthropological mindset pulled them into the lives of demographically small communities and made them more versed in synchronic than diachronic analysis, while today the interest, as mentioned, is in variations of temporal as much as spatial scales. I therefore share the sympathetic self-critique of an Italian microhistorian who recently called "the relationship between micro and macro ... the veritable Achilles' heel of *microstoria*."²⁹ In its most inspiring versions, microhistory advocated combining micro and macro scales, rather than favoring the micro as an article of faith. In keeping with this ideal, global connections were hinted at here and there. Levi, for instance, denied the privileging of the small scale to understand pre-industrial communities by offering a telling example: "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."³⁰ Neither he nor other microhistorians, however, have bequeathed to us a full account of how to capture this interrelationship of the local and the global.

Having sought myself to explore empirically and analytically the fruitfulness of that interrelationship in a study of long-distance trade in the pre-industrial period, I may appear defensive.³¹ But I remain convinced that to recognize microhistory's Achilles' heel is not to deny the potential of the variation of scale of analysis and therefore microhistory's higher call in our time of deep and big history. At a minimum, Revel has kept that higher call alive for all those myriad readers who turn to his essays on microhistory.

We hear more than an echo of his teaching in influential contributions. Sanjay Subrahmanyam once dismissed those who “have enthusiastically supported the view that ‘microhistory’ can capture the macrocosm.”³² But more recently he, too, has looked more generously toward that view. In his *Three Ways to Be Alien*, he appears more impatient toward the hopefulness about past inter-cultural encounters conveyed in several global microhistories than about the heuristic value of biographies and micro-analysis per se.³³ Without wishing to force him into a box he does not belong in, one can recall Ginzburg’s exhortations to follow “the traces” and therefore consider Subrahmanyam’s own personal and academic ties to Revel at the EHESS and to Ginzburg at UCLA. More than Revel and the Italian microhistorians, Subrahmanyam has spent his career questioning deep-seated generalizations about the writing of world history and the relations between Europe and Asia in the age leading up to modern colonialism. Like the Italian microhistorians, he has often confronted the challenge of making arguments on the basis of documents that fit Grendi’s notion of “the exceptional normal.” His “connected histories” can be interpreted as one possible productive encounter of global and micro-history. It is no coincidence that his credo is congruent with Revel’s: “generalizations are ... too important to be left to specialized generalists.”³⁴

In its now long career, microhistory has crossed as many if not more boundaries than the tricksters and the travelers who are the subjects of its recent incarnations. As a multi-scale analysis of its peregrinations shows, the fate of microhistory in Italy, France, and the United States reminds us that in the twenty-first century, the world of academia—in spite of its privileges and its global universities—is not flat. Even in the era of the internet and affordable travel, ideas need cross-cultural brokers to traverse deep-seated national and institutional traditions. It takes the vision, skills, and dedication of individual scholars to create personal and institutional synergy across linguistic boundaries, pedagogical and disciplinary habits, and engrained national cultures. Revel has been microhistory’s most committed and valuable cross-cultural broker. Without any originalist nostalgia, he has remained consistently loyal to the impetus of those Italian microhistorians who in the 1980s set off to search for a social history capable of recovering past experiences while also reflecting on the normative and evidentiary filters that hamper that effort of recovery. In the process, he has exposed the roots of the move toward micro-historical analysis, brought the implications of that move into sharp relief, and redeployed those tools to produce new effects.³⁵ If readers of French and English across the continents can debate what the difference between *microstoria*, *microhistoire*, and microhistory might imply, not to mention what their respective merits and limitations are in the changing scholarly landscape that is unfolding before us, it is to a large extent thanks to the probing interventions that Revel continues to provide.

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Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period (2009, 2012) and *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000–1900*, co-edited with Cátia Antunes and Leor Halevi (2014). She currently serves as co-editor in chief of the academic journal *Jewish History*.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Edward Berenson for extending the invitation to me and Herrick Chapman for welcoming my contribution in this journal.
2. Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann, "How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *American Historical Review* 118, 5 (2013): 1431–72.
3. In what is likely the most hyperbolic indictment of university administrators to be voiced in print, a British scholar recently compared those among the latter who are willing to comply with the UK ministerial demand for quantifiable indexes of academic output to collaborators of the Vichy regime. Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012), 131.
4. It was the so-called 'Ruberti reform,' which was named after the minister who designed it, Antonio Ruberti, and which advocated greater autonomy for each campus within the Italian state university system and raised the specter of private funding for academic research.
5. Jacques Revel, "Histoire au ras du sol," in Giovanni Levi, *Le Pouvoir au village: Histoire d'un exorciste dans le Piémont du XVIIe siècle*, trans. Monique Aymard (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), i–xxxiii. The expression "projet micro-historique" appears on pages ix and xi, but the forward notion of "projet" infuses the entire text.
6. In English, see notably, Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 93–113 and Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20, 1 (1993): 10–35, reprinted in Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, trans. Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 193–214.
7. Simona Cerutti, "Microhistory: Social Relations vs. Cultural Models?" in *Between Sociology and History: Essays on Microhistory, Collective Action, and Nation-Building*, ed. Anna-Maija Castrén, Markku Lonkila, and Matti Peltonen (Helsinki: SKS/Finnish Literature Society, 2004), 17–40; Carlo Ginzburg, "Latitude, Slaves, and Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory," *Critical Inquiry* 31, 3 (2005), 682.
8. I cite from the French translation of Edoardo Grendi, "Ripensare la microstoria?" *Quaderni Storici* 86 (1994): 539–49, which appeared as "Repenser la micro-histoire?" in *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard-Le Seuil, 1996), 233. While identifying crucial common trends among the early generation of Italian microhistorians, this article also set Ginzburg apart for his interests in cultural forms in contrast to an emphasis on social practices among other advocates of the genre. It is important to stress that, if Grendi did not hide his preferences, he nonetheless praised the lack of orthodoxy among Italian microhistorians for the dialectics it generated between socially and culturally inflected his-

torical analysis. Grendi first foreshadowed the notion of the “exceptional normal” when speaking of “exceptional documents that can turn out to be exceptionally ‘normal’ because they are relevant” (“il documento eccezionale può risultare eccezionalmente ‘normale,’ appunto perché rilevante”): Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici* 35 (1977), 512. Levi later turned the idea in a more cogent (if consciously paradoxical) concept by translating it as “the exceptional normal”: Levi, “On Microhistory,” 109. Note that in borrowing the concept from Grendi, Jerrold Seigel spoke of “the normal exception,” perhaps a more accurate English rendition of that oxymoron. Seigel, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics, and Culture in England, France and Germany since 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28. I appreciate Seigel drawing my attention to this point.

9. Jacques Revel, “Micro-analyse et construction du social,” in *Jeux d'échelles*, 15.
10. Already in the late 1970s, and in the very pages of the journal, did Revel begin to question the supremacy of the *Annales* and to dissect its history: Jacques Revel, “Histoire et sciences sociales: Les paradigmes des Annales,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 34, 6 (1979): 1360–76. See also the more succinct but no less revealing: Revel, “The Annales: Continuities and Discontinuities,” *Review* 1, 3–4 (1978): 9–18. The latter appeared in a monographic issue devoted to “The Impact of the ‘Annales’ School on the Social Sciences” in one of the earliest issues of the journal associated with the newly created Fernand Braudel Center at State University of New York at Binghamton.
11. Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past & Present* 85 (1979): 3–24.
12. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), viii.
13. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
14. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 13.
15. *Ibid.*, 11. On Grendi, see above.
16. Clifford Geertz, “Among the Infidels,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2006.
17. Tonio Andrade points to the book as a primary example of “global microhistory” (more on this rubric below). Andrade, “A Chinese Farmer, Two Black Boys, and a Warlord: Towards a Global Microhistory,” *Journal of World History* 21, 4 (2011): 573–91. In my experience, that is also how graduate students in seminars understand the book.
18. For a capacious understanding microhistory in its multifarious incarnations and some purposefully divergent (if at times debatable) interpretations of its many courses, one can consult Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szi­jártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), as well as the website maintained by Ildikó Kenyó and István Szi­jártó (Eötvös University, Budapest), <http://microhistory.eu/home.html>.
19. Carlo Ginzburg, “Prove e possibilità: In margine a *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre* di Natalie Zemon Davis,” in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Il ritorno di Martin Guerre: Un caso di doppia identità nella Francia del Cinquecento*, trans. Sandro Lombardini (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), 131–54; English trans. “Proofs and Possibilities: In the Margins of Natalie Zemon Davis’ *The Return of Martin Guerre*,” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 113–27 (reprinted in Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces*, 54–71).
20. The citation is from the introduction to Ginzburg’s recent *Threads and Traces*, 3. Already at a conference at UCLA in 1990, which would yield an influential volume, Ginzburg took on the meaning of “relativism” and “skepticism,” especially in polemics with Hyden White. See Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Repre-*

- sentation: *Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
21. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, eds., *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*, trans. Margaret A. Gallucci with Mary M. Gallucci and Carole C. Gallucci (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe*, trans. Eren Branch (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); and *History from Crime*, trans. Corrada Biazzo Curry, Margaret A. Gallucci, and Mary M. Gallucci (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
 22. Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
 23. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer and others (New York: New Press, 1995).
 24. Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 300.
 25. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), II: 1242.
 26. Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social," 26.
 27. Andrade, "A Chinese Farmer," 574.
 28. Revel, "Histoire au ras du sol," xxiv.
 29. Luciano Allegra, "Ancora a proposito di micro-macro," in *Microstoria: A vent'anni da L'eredità immateriale; Saggi in onore di Giovanni Levi*, ed. Paola Lanaro (Milan: Franco Angeli 2011), 64.
 30. Levi, "On Microhistory," 96.
 31. Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
 32. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "On World Historians in the Sixteenth Century," *Representations* 91 (2005), 29.
 33. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011).
 34. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Toward a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, 3 (1997), 742.
 35. Jean Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel, "Penser par cas: Raisonner à partir de singularités," in *Penser par cas*, ed. Passeron and Revel (Paris: EHESS, 2005), 9–44.